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## A VALUABLE LIFE



# A VALUABLE LIFE

*A Novel*

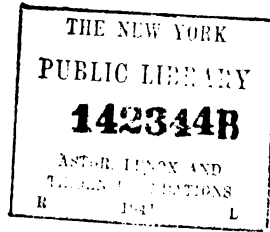
BY ADELINE SERGEANT,  
AUTHOR OF "THE LADY CHARLOTTE," ETC.



CHICAGO AND NEW YORK:  
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# A VALUABLE LIFE.

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A NOVEL,

By ADELINE SERGEANT.

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## CHAPTER I.

### NUMBER SIXTY-THREE.

"You're the sixty-third applicant," said Miss Keturah Kettlewell with some tartness, "and I'm quite sure that I cannot interview sixty-four."

Miss Kettlewell had once been a handsome woman; but it must be confessed that Time had committed some ravages upon her beauty. She was sixty years of age and looked older; her teeth had fallen out, and her fine nose nearly met her prominent chin; her figure was bent, and her pale sunken face was covered by innumerable small wrinkles which gave her a look of age. Had not her dark eyes been still so bright she would have looked insignificant, but those keen, flashing orbs seemed to see everything—to know everything—to make her powerful and important, a person of whom the world must stand in awe.

The world generally did stand in awe of Miss Keturah Kettlewell. In her presence, at any rate. Behind her back, the world was apt to laugh at her, but never when she was within hearing. For her sharp tongue and her bright eyes made her formidable; and, besides, she was very, very rich. It is not easy to laugh at a person who has at least fifteen thousand pounds a year.

Of course she had a beautiful old house of her own, with a terrace and a walled garden, and a park; with fine old rooms and a gallery full of pictures; but it was characteristic of her that she shut herself up in one corner of it, and declared that it was much too big for her, and that she should like to pull it down. Especially did she say that it was too big when her one beloved nephew quitted England after an unfortunate love-affair which made him restlessly anxious to see the world; and then she evolved the idea of a companion—an idea which resulted in the placing of an advertisement in the papers, and the application of at least three hundred ladies, who were all willing to read aloud, to play the piano, to sew, to mend, to make, to be musical and cheerful on fifty pounds a year. Miss Kettlewell saw sixty-two applicants, and at the sixty-third she determined to stop.

"My brain is becoming perfectly addled after seeing so many women, young and old," she delivered herself. "I never was fond of women; I think them a great mistake. And they are all alike. The young girl with her curls, and the old maid with her spectacles—" here she looked severely at the last candidate for the office, who happened to be about forty and to wear eyeglasses—"are equally deserving of reprobation. They gossip and snigger and tell tales—"

"Excuse me, Miss Kettlewell," said Number Sixty-Three unexpectedly, "I neither gossip nor tell tales."

Thus brought to book, Miss Kettlewell raised her striking old head—it was like a portrait of Rembrandt, with its vivid dark eyes and white hair, its framework of costly lace falling over rich brocade and its background of panelled wall—and inspected the proposed companion more carefully. Miss Lavinia Wedderburn was, as we have said, at least forty years of age; she was very spare, very slight, with a certain elegance of figure which her shabby clothing disguised but did not hide; she had sharp, well-cut pale features, with peculiarly thin, tight lips, and

small light blue eyes. Her hair was dark, parted in the middle and neatly waved down each side of the parting, her hands were long and slender. It was probable that she had been a pretty girl. Her dress was black and Puritanically plain; she was decidedly shabby, but she was not unladylike. Miss Kettlewell turned her attention upon her, and found her almost interesting.

"Your name is Lavinia Wedderburn," she stated, as if she were making an accusation, rather than asking a question.

Miss Wedderburn bowed her head.

"And you are,"—referring to a paper—"forty-two?"

"Forty-two years, six months, and three days," said Miss Wedderburn categorically.

"What can you do?" said Miss Kettlewell.

Miss Wedderburn replied in a hard voice, which was yet not without musical qualities: "I can read aloud for any length of time."

"Good!" said the old lady. "My last companion was hoarse in twenty minutes."

"I know something of gardening—if you are fond of plants."

"My gardener attends to them. Can you arrange flowers?"

"Pretty well. But I can play the piano," said Miss Wedderburn hastily, as if seeking to atone for some confessed deficiency. "I can read music well; I can play the harmonium and the organ—a little; I am used to church music."

"Humph!" said Miss Kettlewell, looking at her keenly, "that won't be of much good to you here. I hate music. Do you like cats?"

Miss Wedderburn might possibly have been going to answer that she hated cats, for she hesitated a little in her reply, had not a very fine specimen of a tabby cat suddenly leaped up on a little table between her and Miss



Kettlewell, and stood with his tail erect, evidently hoping to be stroked.

"That is Peter," said Miss Kettlewell conversationally. "He is a most intelligent person. He heard the word 'cat' mentioned, and immediately introduced himself. Kindly stroke his head, Miss Wedderburn. Now, Peter, what do you think of Miss Wedderburn?"

Miss Wedderburn performed the office required of her with slight cordiality and Peter, evidently recognizing the perfunctory character of her attention, immediately sat down on the table between the two ladies and wagged his long tail angrily.

"That is curious," said Miss Kettlewell, anxiously. "I have never known Peter's judgment to fail."

Miss Wedderburn stroked him again.

Peter rose and yawned, then deliberately precipitated himself into his mistress's lap, where he turned round three times and then went fast asleep.

"He is very perplexing," said Miss Kettlewell, "however, he has not sworn at you, and he does swear at some people. And you are the sixty-third person that I have seen. . . . I suppose you are in real want of a situation?"

"Yes," said Miss Wedderburn, grimly. She was not going to confess to this rich woman that she had but three and six-pence in the world.

"You have no relations, perhaps?"

"Only a cousin, I was left an orphan at an early age."

"And this cousin," said Miss Kettlewell with interest, "where and what is he?"

Her observant eyes saw that Miss Wedderburn's pale cheeks flushed a little, that her blue eyes shone as she answered the question.

"He is a great man—or will be a great man. He is a philanthropist. He lectures on the condition of the poor."

"Good gracious!" said Miss Kettlewell. "Is he a rich man, then?"

"No, Miss Kettlewell, he is poor. It is therefore the more noble of him to devote himself to social and economic questions. Religious questions, also," Miss Wedderburn seemed to add as an afterthought.

"Is he a clergyman, then?"

"Well, no; he is not connected with the church, I regret to say."

"I presume you don't mean that he is an infidel," said Miss Kettlewell, with a snort. Miss Wedderburn hastened to reassure her.

"By no means, Miss Kettlewell. My cousin is a true believer. He has connected himself with some fanatics of the commoner sort at present, but I have no doubt that he will sooner or later see the error of his ways."

"It's generally later," said Miss Kettlewell, cynically. "He's the only relation you have, you say? And what does he do for a living?"

"He is employed," said Miss Wedderburn with dignity, "as a sort of delegate by a London committee to go out to the South Sea Islands, and investigate one or two matters for them there. There is a sort of slave trade flourishing in those regions, I believe, which he is to inquire into. He has a scheme also, I believe, for planting a colony of English workmen in the islands of the Pacific. He speaks and lectures on the subject sometimes."

"I suppose he's a humbug," said Miss Kettlewell.

"Not at all," Miss Wedderburn rejoined. She rose from her seat. "Any imputation on my dear cousin is so obnoxious to me, that I fear I should hardly suit you as your companion, Miss Kettlewell. I could not remain silent if doubts should be cast upon his integrity, and you seem somewhat inclined to suspect him—for what reason I cannot imagine, except that he is a Dissenter."

"Oh, sit down," said Miss Kettlewell. A declaration of independent opinion was after all very dear to her heart. "I shall not abuse your cousin to you, you may be sure of that. Where is he now?"

"His whereabouts is not known to me exactly. He may be in Australia or on the Pacific Ocean, or on one of the South Sea Islands. He has been away for three years. While he was at home, I never wanted; but he has a wife and child"—there was a malignant gleam in Miss Wedderburn's eyes—"and of course they come first."

"Ah, I see; you wanted to marry him," said Miss Kettlewell, cruelly.

"Madam!"

"I said you wanted to marry him," Miss Kettlewell rejoined. "You need not look so indignant. It was a very natural desire, I am sure—under the circumstances. Who was his wife?"

"A nobody."

"Of course—I understand that. What? a barmaid? a governess?—a—a companion?"

"She was a minister's daughter," said Miss Wedderburn, coloring in spite of herself. "A very pretty woman, but with nothing in her. She is very delicate. It was partly in order to benefit her health that the committee provided funds for her and the child to accompany Silas."

"Silas! A curious name," commented the old lady. "Well, you interest me very much, Miss Wedderburn. I shall be glad if you will stay with me. I really am not equal to interviewing more than sixty-three applicants for the situation I have to offer. I give fifty pounds a year, neither more nor less. I think it is ample—considering that board and lodging are also given without charge. I do not wish to be stingy; I will give sixty if you will stay, for I rather fancy that you may suit me; but there is one thing I wish to mention, you must not reckon on getting anything in my will."

"I have no expectations of anything of the kind," said Miss Wedderburn frostily.

"A good many people are not so disinterested," Miss Kettlewell rejoined. "Did you ever happen to hear of the Flemings?"

"The Flemings! What Flemings, Miss Kettlewell? I know several Flemings."

"I mean the Flemings of Rushton, not six miles away. Do you know Rushton?"

"Scarcely. I have stayed there for a day or two—that is all."

"The Flemings," said Miss Kettlewell, deliberately, "are relations of mine. They are my second-cousins; and their children are my second-cousins once removed. You understand the relationship?"

"Quite so."

"Fleming," said the old lady, contemptuously, "is a country doctor, and his wife is equal to him—that is all I can say. They have two or three children growing up—the eldest may be twelve or thirteen by this time. Chloe is her ridiculous name; it was like the Flemings to call her Chloe. If she had been called Keturah, after me, I might have taken some notice of the girl."

"Quite so," Miss Wedderburn said again.

"They send the children over to see me now and then. Pert little things—pretty enough, but ill-mannered. If Dr. Fleming thinks that I am going to leave my money to Chloe or to that little wretch Milly, he is mistaken. And I don't want them to encroach. It will be one of your duties, Miss Wedderburn, to see that they don't encroach."

"I will do my best," said Miss Wedderburn.

"I boxed Chloe's ears the other day," Miss Kettlewell said, in a ruminative tone. "She had been sadly impertinent. The children of the present day are unbearable. I must say that Chloe took it very oddly. She said that she should not come back until I apologized. And she has not been here since, although it is nearly a fortnight since."

"She relies on your good nature, no doubt," said Miss Wedderburn dryly.

"She need not do anything of the sort. I have made up my mind to leave every penny I possess to my nephew,

Laurence Corbet. He does not need it, which is a recommendation to my mind. He has a good income and a house not very far from mine, and he cannot be suspected of fortune-hunting. The Flemings—poor things!—are as poor as church mice.”

“And no doubt expect to get a good deal out of you,” said Miss Wedderburn quietly.

“Exactly. And I don’t mean to let them. Laurence shall have my money. Though I must say that Laurence has disappointed me by going off to wild parts of the world simply because he was jilted by Justine Spinceley. Such weakness!”

“Quite so, Miss Kettlewell,” the companion hastened to admit.

“But he will come back. I am sure he will come back. If he does not, I shall have to leave my money to hospitals and charities, but I will not leave it to the Flemings. Does Chloe Fleming imagine that she is going to twist me round her little finger?”

Miss Wedderburn intimated that she thought such a proceeding utterly impossible. But she reserved her private opinion on the matter until she had seen Chloe Fleming.

She was installed as companion at sixty pounds a year. It was the greatest piece of good luck that had come to her for years.

She and her cousin, Silas Wedderburn, as she took care to inform Miss Kettlewell, had been brought up together, and had been like brother and sister until Silas married. Ever since that time, Lavinia Wedderburn’s life had been a burden to her. Silas’s wife had disliked her, and Silas had therefore done his utmost to keep them apart. The birth of Silas’s child had not re-united them; the child seemed to Lavinia like a new barrier set up between herself and Silas, whom she adored. Miss Kettlewell was quick to divine the reason of the division.

“You cared for him too much, Lavinia,” she said, when

she had grown sufficiently at home with Miss Wedderburn to call her by her Christian name. "You would have married him if you could, and probably his wife guessed it. I don't see how you can expect any friendliness from her."

"I neither expect it nor want it," said Miss Wedderburn, setting her thin lips.

As time went on, the community of interest in two absent relatives drew the two women together. Miss Kettlewell had letters from Laurence—witty, charming letters, in which he described the scenery and companionship in which he found himself, but said not a word about coming home. And Lavinia had letters from Silas the enthusiast; letters full of religious aspirations, of dreams, of the future, of schemes and plans which were too idealistic to be realized. Lavinia read these letters aloud to Miss Kettlewell from time to time. Miss Kettlewell sneered, but was impressed, and sometimes sent a cheque by her companion to encourage Silas Wedderburn in his good work. She became more and more impressed by the conviction that Silas Wedderburn was a good man, with a great career before him. "It is a valuable life," she mused aloud, as Lavinia dilated on the dangers that he ran in the strange seas of which she knew so little. And to them both, that life became peculiarly dear.

So Miss Wedderburn stayed and made King's Leigh her home. She was an invaluable companion. She was never tired, never out of temper, never depressed. She snubbed the Flemings, when they came over from Rush-ton, with exactly the right degree of scorn. The Fleming children hated her. But Miss Kettlewell was supremely satisfied.

It was an unusual thing, therefore, that Miss Wedderburn should one day prove unequal to her duties. She faltered in her reading, she broke down in her writing of notes; she was so strange in manner, that Miss Kettlewell at last asked peevishly if anything were wrong.

For answer, Miss Wedderburn placed a letter in her hand, and turned away her face.

It was a letter from Silas Wedderburn, and it announced in choice and fitting language the fact that his wife had died in an out-of-the-way place in Australia, and that he, being left alone with little Fanny, had determined to sail as soon as possible for England.

"I don't see why you should be so upset, Lavinia," said Miss Kettlewell, crossly, as she handed back the letter to her weeping companion. "Of course he will come back and marry you. What else can he do with a child of nine upon his hands? You ought to be glad of the chance of seeing him—while my silly nephew Laurence Corbet goes scouring the world in search of a new sensation! I have no patience with men like him. Come, Lavinia, your life is before you; thank God and take courage, and marry Silas as soon as ever he comes home again—though where I shall get another companion from, God only knows! I shall not advertise again. I shall take Chloe to live with me if I can get no one else."

But Miss Wedderburn did not approve of this idea, although she was not averse to the thought of marrying her cousin Silas when he came home again.

## CHAPTER II.

## THE PHILANTHROPIST.

He watched them as they came on board the steamer and was vaguely interested in the new arrivals. The steamer had been stopped by signal from the island, he understood; and some little time elapsed before a small fleet of boats emerged from the reef-bound harbor, bringing out to the English ship an Englishman and his child. With these came a party of friends to see them off, a number of smiling natives adorned with wreaths of scarlet hibiscus and other brilliant blossoms, and some very modest luggage which bore in white letters the name of Wedderburn.

The passengers on board the Attaman, on its way to San Francisco, were eager for any diversion, and leaned over the bulwarks with spy glasses in their hands as the little boats flew over the sparkling blue water to the great ocean steamer, which waited for them quietly like some monster of the deep surrounded by darting sea-birds. Laurence Corbet, his elbows on the wooden rail, his glass at his eyes, was one of the most interested and most observant watchers, and when the Englishman in the boat stood up and called out a question to the captain, Mr. Corbet raised himself and lounged a little nearer the gangway, so that he might learn the purport of the colloquy. Not that he was naturally of a curious disposition. But anything serves to pass away time on board ship; and moreover, Laurence Corbet considered himself a student of manners and of men.

The question had reference to a passage for the Englishman and his little daughter to San Francisco. Could they be taken? They were very anxious to get away. And as



the captain seemed propitious, the Englishman and his friends climbed up the ladder that was lowered for their benefit and made the rest of their arrangements on board.

There was more talking than seemed to Laurence absolutely necessary, but it was carried on in subdued voices, and not till later did he discover the nature of the conversation. The Englishman—or at least his friends for him—claimed to be taken as a first-class passenger at a second-class fare, saying that this arrangement had been made in other cases where a gentleman engaged in missionary or philanthropic work had travelled by that line. The captain argued that the arrangement was not in his hands, and that the owners had not authorized him to make any such exceptions; moreover, was the gentleman a missionary?

At this question, shrewdly put, there was a little uneasiness manifested, and it was finally allowed that the would-be passenger was a minister, not engaged in any kind of missionary work, but sent out as a sort of delegate by an English committee to examine into the state of the slave-trade in the Southern Pacific and report upon the Kanakas and their employment. He bore the title of "Reverend," however; and was in considerable repute as a preacher and a speaker at public meetings. He was reported to be in possession of a new scheme which he had not yet divulged.

"The Reverend Silas Wedderburn," said the captain thoughtfully, reading from the card which one of the residents on the island had handed to him. "Well, sir, I think the committee that sent you ought to be able to afford first-class fare for first-class accommodation. I don't think I should be justified in relaxing the rules of the company to the extent you propose."

Laurence had drawn near enough to hear the response, which came from Mr. Wedderburn himself in a singularly musical voice. "It is for the work's sake that we ask this consideration, not for my own sake, nor even for that of

my child"—putting forward a fair-haired little girl in a black frock—"but that our funds may not be diminished by unnecessary expenditure on my poor account."

Musical as was the voice, there was something in the tone that Laurence did not like. "Hang it, why doesn't he go second-class or steerage like a man, and not cringe in that way?" he muttered to himself, and he moved to a little distance. But he could not help hearing the captain's curt reply.

"Very sorry, sir. Must stick to regulations. We can't stay here much longer; if you wish to come—come, if not, I'll trouble you to get into the boats again and let them sheer off a bit; we've no time to waste."

Laurence heard no more, but he saw the heads of the party of men who had accompanied Mr. Wedderburn very close together, as if in consultation, and finally he saw that the luggage was being carried on board, and that the affair had evidently been adjusted to the satisfaction of everyone concerned. But he did not think that the new passenger looked particularly amiable, and he presently saw him give a furtive kick to one of the brown-skinned islanders who was carrying his luggage—not a severe or cruel kick by any manner of means, but a sly and furtive one, as if he wanted to wreak his angry feelings upon any person who could not resent an injury. Then his face became wreathed in smiles—the sudden change was quite startling—as his friends approached him one by one to say good-by. Perhaps nobody save Laurence, who had keen eyes and keen intuitions, observed that most of his friends pressed something into Mr. Wedderburn's hand as they took leave of him; parting gifts, doubtless, which were received with suitable gratitude, and which Laurence shrewdly suspected to be of pecuniary value. The last to go was a burly man in white clothes and a palmetto hat, who openly presented the "delegate" with a fat portmonnaie, and said, loud enough to be heard by the by-standers, that it was a token of respect and gratitude and that Mr. Wedderburn

was an honor to the cloth. At which, Mr. Wedderburn's rather pale and handsome face flushed sensitively and Laurence vaguely hoped that the minister, if he were a minister, was more wounded than flattered by the gift. But he could not tell. The big man in white clothes clambered down to the boat, and Mr. Wedderburn stood by the bulwarks, looking after him with a strange, sphinx-like smile on his enigmatic countenance.

The little girl crept up to him, and—timidly, it seemed to Laurence—touched his hand. She was a handsome, rather than a merely pretty child; she had clearly-cut, pale features, fine dark eyes, and a mass of chestnut brown hair which hung loosely on her shoulders in long, natural waves and curls. She did not look well cared for or well-dressed, and Laurence Corbet surmised that her mother was dead. But, in that case, why did he not send the child to school, instead of taking her round the globe with him?

Mr. Wedderburn started when she touched him, but clasped the little hand tenderly, and walked away with her towards the purser's cabin. Then he disappeared into the lower regions of the vessel, and was seen no more until dinner-time, when, to Mr. Corbet's surprise, he presented himself in the first-class dining-saloon, and was given a seat which happened to be immediately opposite that of Laurence, although at a different table. Thus seated, with his little girl beside him, he was much observed by the passengers, and particularly by Mr. Corbet, who felt himself unusually interested by the personality of the man.

Silas Wedderburn had certainly a striking face. It was pale and rather worn, with high sharp features, and deeply set but brilliant dark eyes; his dark hair was rather longer than was usual at that time, and was pushed away from his brow in a sort of "admired disorder." His mouth was larger and more prominent than it ought to have been, but it had beautiful lines, and was curiously expressive

and sensitive; his well-cut nose had but one fault, the nostrils were too wide and too much exposed to view. Laurence gathered from these signs that the man was probably something of an orator; a certain fluency of speech often accompanies features of this kind. It was an interesting face, almost an attractive one; but the mouth and chin were certainly a little weak. And Mr. Corbet disliked weakness almost more than wickedness.

The little girl was not much like her father. There was indeed a superficial resemblance in coloring, but Laurence noticed that her features were more refined and delicately cut than Mr. Wedderburn's; and her mouth and chin—child as she was—were singularly firm. "She has the stronger will of the two," Laurence said.

He was interesting himself more than usual over these people and he rather wondered why. It was not his fashion to be interested, even when he was most observant. A great passion, a great sorrow, had overwhelmed him in the days gone by, and he had saved very little hope and faith out of the wreck of his life. Yet he was barely three and thirty, full of physical vigor, bearing no trace of his trouble in his outward man—save, perhaps, in his eyes, which had an unusual seriousness, even a look of sadness, in repose. His hair and pointed beard were chestnut in color, his figure was tall, strong, broad-shouldered. He had good features, although he was not remarkably handsome, and there was a pleasantness in his smile which redeemed the listless melancholy of his eyes. He was a disappointed man, but he did not want the world to find it out.

He had a beautiful house and great estate in Warwickshire; but the life of a country squire was not to his taste, and for the last three years he had not been seen in England. He was not on his way to England now. He meant to visit the Western States and then go north to Canada—stifling the voice of conscience which told him that the longer he stayed away from his own home, the more diffi-

cult he would find it to go back. "Then I will never go back," he sometimes said to himself impatiently.

After dinner, he found an opportunity of speaking privately to the captain, with whom he was on very friendly terms. "Who are those people who came on board to-day?" he asked.

"Never saw them before," said Captain Duncan cautiously. Then, relaxing a little, "Have heard of the man often enough though, I think he's sincere enough, but I don't know that I trust these black-coated gentry for my part. He speaks well."

"Have you heard him?" said Laurence, offering the captain a cigar.

"Heard him at a meeting in Melbourne," said the captain with a nod of thanks. "Rather flowery, but clever enough. Wanted funds to start a new colony in the Hawaiian group."

"What sort of a colony?"

"English ruffians, sir, who won't do any work at home. That's the idea. Plant them in a South Sea Island, to corrupt the natives and sleep away their time under a palm tree. It's a fine idea."

Laurence laughed. "There was some difficulty about his passage-money, wasn't there?"

"Wanted first-class accommodation for second-class fare. Not if I knew it. You saw the big chap in white clothes and a palmetto hat! He's a trader; the richest trader I know; and he was backing up Wedderburn. I made him put his hand in his pocket and pay the difference. It wouldn't do him any harm."

"Trader! What does he trade in?"

"Natives, I think," said the captain with a wink. "But you won't say I said so; after all, I believe Silas Wedderburn is an honest man."

Laurence felt enough interest in the subject and in the minister, to open a conversation with him a day or two later. Wedderburn's face flushed, his eyes lighted up, at

once. He was something of an enthusiast in his own particular way.

"Yes, it was my idea to begin with," he said. "I had seen something of these South Sea Islands in my young days; for I was a wild, reprobate youth, sir, and ran away to sea before I was fifteen. But my experiences have been of use to me in my later years; in my converted state."

Laurence disliked phrases. He sat, nursing his knee, and casting a sharp glance at Mr. Wedderburn's face now and then. "You see your way to a good speculation, perhaps?" he said.

"I know nothing of speculation or of trade," said Silas Wedderburn gently. "My father was an Independent minister; I have never had a taste for business. But when I was working in London, I saw the crowds of toiling, sordid, down-trodden men and women in the hovels of the great city, and my heart rose up in prayer for them; and then it seemed to me, sir, as if a light were thrown upon my path."

"In what way?" said Laurence. He was a little contemptuous still. But Wedderburn's child had crept nearer to the speaker, and was now standing close to her father's shoulders with her clear hazel eyes fixed upon his face. There was such trust, such love, such reverence, in those beautiful eyes, that Laurence Corbet curbed his tongue and tried to govern his thoughts for the child's sake.

"I thought of these lovely islands of the southern main," said the minister, "with their flowers and trees and mountain-heights—a very Paradise for men! And it seemed to me that if some of our surplus population could be shipped off to these islands, their happiness and prosperity would be assured. Ah, think of it! the change from the fetid garret, the seething street, the squalid court—to these blue seas and skies, these gorgeous flowers, these graceful palms! It would be like a change from hell to heaven."

"I doubt whether the city arabs would appreciate it,"

said Laurence with a smile. "I am a doubting Sadducee—a very Gallio, Mr. Wedderburn, and I am afraid you would have to change the hearts and souls of these people before you could benefit them by bringing them here."

"But that is what we hope to do," said Wedderburn, with fresh light in his deep-set eyes. "Change their hearts! Yes, and we hope to do it by the love of God."

"You persuaded others of the advisability of your scheme?"

"I laid it before a committee of ministers—of our Body. They approved—provisionally. I was deputed to come out here and to examine the facilities for carrying out our scheme; and I am now returning, laden with details, my scheme formulated and ready for use. I hope to be the pioneer of a new colony, the leader of a new society—"

"The king, in fact, of a new state," said Laurence coolly.

Silas Wedderburn took this remark in a way which puzzled Mr. Corbet a little. He colored all over his pale face, then rose from his seat, with a movement of natural dignity, and rested his hand on his child's head for a moment as he spoke.

"I hope, sir," he said, with a touch of reproach in his voice, "to lead these poor people back to peace with God."

"I beg your pardon if I have said anything you do not like," said Laurence, somewhat moved by the answer, "and I beg that you will not go away, Mr. Wedderburn. Do sit down. I am very much interested."

Mr. Wedderburn hesitated a little. "I trust that you throw no aspersion on my honor and honesty, sir," he said stiffly.

"Not a bit of it," said Laurence, laughing, "I only supplied what would have been my own motive; I cannot pretend to judge of yours. This is your little girl, I think?" he went on, wishing to change the subject, for it was evident that the minister was pained.

"Yes, my daughter Frances," and hearing her name, the

child came forward and offered her little hand to the stranger with a readiness which delighted Laurence. He held the little fingers in his palm, and looked at her. What a beautiful child she was! There was something peculiarly attractive about her in Laurence's eyes.

"You are a young traveller," he said softly.

"When we set out, her mother was with us," Mr. Wedderburn observed. "I buried her in Australia."

"It is a sad thing for a child to be motherless," said Laurence. And little Frances's eyes seemed to say that she understood.

"I try to be father and mother both," said the minister; and, in spite of his earnestness, there was a touch of pomposity in his tone which cropped up every now and then in his conversation and always made Laurence Corbet feel irreverently inclined to laugh.

They were in the saloon, and it was growing late. Many of the passengers had already retired for the night; others were playing games at the central table. The air was stifling and hot, and a slight haze seemed to be spreading itself over the room. The players were too much absorbed by their game to notice it; even Laurence, usually so quick-sighted, had not perceived the strange thickening of the atmosphere. It was almost eleven o'clock, and he wondered why the child Frances was not yet in bed.

Suddenly the sound of flying steps was heard, and one of the passengers, a mere youth, rushed wildly into the saloon. His pale face, his staring eyes, betokened misfortune. Everyone started up to hear what he had to say.

"The ship!" he cried. "The ship! The ship is on fire!"

And then he fell half fainting to the ground, and there was a general rush towards the door.



## CHAPTER III.

## THE BURNING SHIP.

In another moment everyone was on deck. It was a wonder to Laurence that he had noticed neither the smoke nor the smell of fire, but, like the players at the table, his mind had been occupied, though in a different way. But the saloon was already full of a creeping smoke, the companion-way was thick with it, there was a hot feeling in the air. Mr. Wedderburn had caught his child in his arms and torn away to the deck as soon as the alarm reached his ears; Laurence Corbet followed more slowly, with the glimmer of a smile upon his face. As a matter of fact, he hardly believed in the reality of this alarm. But when he trod the deck, he saw that there was danger. The smoke was rising in clouds from two places near the funnel, and sweeping across the deck. A dull red light was already perceptible, and a tongue of flame rushed up the masts as Laurence gazed. The magnitude of the danger at once came home to him, and made him serious, although he did not lose his calm. It was quite evident that if the fire had already made so much way no power could extinguish it; the ship was doomed, and the passengers' only chance lay in getting away from her by the boats.

The scene of uproar and confusion that ensued was indescribable. The captain did his best to enforce discipline, but at first it seemed an almost impossible task. There were some ruffianly Malays among the crew, and it was difficult to prevent them from seizing upon the boats and making off with them. It was not until the captain and his officers had actually cut down two of the men and shot another, that something like order was restored. The task of launching the boats could then be proceeded

with, but there was indeed urgent need for haste; the dull red glow of the fire was reflected in the water, the flames were already shooting over one side of the vessel with a sullen roar which surmounted even the sound of the wind and waves. For the wind, unfortunately, had risen; a circumstance which added to the danger of all on board; for it increased the fury of the flames, and made it more difficult for the passengers to reach the boats, which were tossed about like corks on the summit of the waves.

Many of the passengers, especially the women, were in their night clothes, muffled in a rug or cloak hastily caught up as they left their cabins, and not daring to return in search of warmer things. But the women were calmer than the men. They stood or sat as they were directed, with white faces, indeed, but with a calm resignation and obedience which contrasted strongly with the frantic terror of some of the men, who were wildly offering large sums of money to anyone who would save them, or breathing out curses against their adverse fate. Certainly one or two of the women fainted, and one went into hysterical fits; but on the whole, they were far quieter and more collected than the men.

Laurence made his way to the captain's side. "Can I do anything to assist you, captain?" he said easily. "I have my revolver here and can shoot pretty straight."

"All right," said Captain Duncan. "Keep your eye on the Malays, and fire if there is a rush for the boats. Passengers, too; some of them are as bad as the yellow-skins. Now then—pass the word along—women and children first, if you please."

There was no rush. The captain's stern promptitude has checked it at once. There was a pistol in his hand, and two of his most trustworthy men possessed cutlasses, which gleamed menacingly in the reddening light. Some of the women and children were already packed into the largest of the boats, and Laurence found time to say another word in the captain's ear.

"Any chance, do you think?" he said.

"We are running straight to land," said the captain, and he mentioned the name of an island that Corbet knew; "I altered the ship's course at the last moment, just before we were obliged to leave the engine room; we shall not get the ship to land, but we may come near enough for the boats to be of service. But there's no land in sight yet."

Laurence looked once more at the scene before him. There was now a great arch of flame rising high into the reddened sky; the water round the vessel was blood-red, the heavy black smoke belched forth like the reek of a furnace. The roar of the fire was growing fearfully loud.

"There is no time to waste," he said to himself. Then he glanced at the red foam that churned under the sides of the vessel and made up his mind that he would rather be drowned than burnt alive.

At that moment, a sudden commotion amongst the people pressing forward towards the boat attracted his attention. A man seemed to be pushing his way through the crowd, his hands fighting madly with those who opposed his progress, his face white, his eyes distended with terror. It took Laurence a moment to recognize—and he recognized it with a shock—the face of Silas Wedderburn in that frantic, terror-stricken man. Involuntarily he called out to him to keep back. But the minister did not hear. He was evidently beside himself with fright. And in the uproar and tumult all around him, it was not to be wondered at if Corbet's remonstrances passed unheeded.

He was fighting to get into the boat with the women and children. It seemed to Laurence a terrible thing to do—until he remembered little Frances, and thought it probable that the child was in the boat already and that her father could not bear to be separated from her. That seemed the only natural and worthy explanation of his madness. Or perhaps he was dragging her forward, to secure a place for her. But he could not see her in the crowd.

Ah, the sailors would not let him advance. He had roughly elbowed a woman aside—he seemed to have lost all control of himself—when one of the ship's officers interfered. Wedderburn was swung rudely back, and on endeavoring to recover his lost ground was collared and actually thrown down upon the deck. Laurence felt some pity for him and also some contempt.

But where was the child, he wondered. He hoped that little Frances was safe. A recollection of her beautiful eyes and long bronze curls came across him and filled his heart with pity. He spoke a word to the captain and hastily resigned his place in the bows to another man, to whom he handed his revolver. "I will be back in a moment or two," he said, "but I want to see whether some friends of mine are safe."

He was warned against resigning his position, but for the moment he did not care in the least whether he came safe to land or not. The overpowering anxiety in his mind was to know what had become of little Frances Wedderburn.

He edged his way through the crowd until he found himself close to the pair he sought. Wedderburn was sitting on a coil of rope, his head leaning on his hands; a groan escaped him now and then. Frances stood beside him, very pale, but, as Laurence noticed, perfectly composed. Mr. Wedderburn started when he heard his own name pronounced, and raised his head. His face was ghastly white, and the blood was trickling from a cut upon his forehead.

"Is there a place for me?" he exclaimed wildly. "For God's sake, help me! Save me! I must not die like a rat in a hole—I cannot die!"

"For shame, Mr. Wedderburn, control yourself," said Laurence sternly. "If not for your own sake, for the sake of others."

"What are others to me?" said the wretched man, wringing his hands. "Save me, for God's sake; you are

strong, you are rich, you can buy a place for me in the boat and God will recompense you as I never can."

"Women and children come first," said Laurence dryly. "Your child shall be saved, if possible. I thought you were fighting for her sake."

"Frances!" He looked vaguely at his little daughter, and shook his head. "Fanny! A mere child! You forget, sir, that mine—mine—is a valuable life; hers is nothing—nothing—in comparison with mine."

"Good heavens, man!" exclaimed Laurence recoiling a pace or two, "do you mean to say that you don't care for your own child?"

"Care for her? Yes, yes! But think of the work I have done—of the work I have yet to do! I have my papers here"—he clapped his hand to his breast—"and I must lay them before the authorities. If they are lost, if I am drowned, all the fruit of my labors will go as well. I tell you, sir, that mine is a valuable life, and I am bound to save it at any cost."

Laurence turned away in disgust. That the man was supremely in earnest about his work, he could not deny. But there was selfishness even in that. For if his life could only be bought by the sacrifice of others—even by the life of his own child—it was evident that Silas Wedderburn did not think it too high a price to pay.

There was a little lull in the noise at that moment; the fire roared less fiercely, and the wind was slightly stilled. Laurence stood looking out to sea, a frown on his brow, a thrill of impatience in his heart. And in the lull, he heard little Frances speaking to her father. She had drawn closer to him and laid her hand inside his arm.

"You won't leave me, papa?" she said, with obvious uncertainty.

Laurence listened for the reply, which came after a deathly pause.

"No, no, child," Silas Wedderburn then said hoarsely. "I won't leave you—if—if—if I can help it."

A very ugly word escaped Laurence's lips. He struck his heel on the boards with sudden passion. Then he wheeled round and addressed the child's father with sudden heat:

"If you are so bent on saving your life, there is a chance for you. Another boat has been launched, I see; and it is not quite full. We may at any rate be able to save your child's life, if not your own."

Silas Wedderburn shuddered from head to foot. He rose from his seat, and cast a look at Frances which made Laurence Corbet's blood run cold with anger and disgust. It was a look that seemed to say that the father cared little for his child in comparison with his own valuable life.

Laurence's eye had not deceived him. He made his way to the other side of the vessel, and looked over the side. There lay one of the boats, dancing on the water, and there was quite evidently a little space. But the men in the boat called up in stentorian tones:

"Room for one only. No more, or you'll sink the boat."

"Now Frances," said Laurence quickly. He had sprung up into the chains and ropes that swayed above the bulwarks and held out his hand to bring Frances to his side. He was resolved to save her, let Mr. Wedderburn drown or not.

"You must jump when I tell you," he said, seizing her by the arm.

"There is room for me—I must be saved, I must escape," said a wild voice at his ear. Silas Wedderburn had crept up beside him, and swayed dizzily at the side. Laurence paid no attention to him; he was busily occupied in preparing the little girl for her leap. She was wonderfully docile; but for a moment she hung back.

"Oh, you'll come, too? And papa will come?"

"Yes, we shall be all right," said Laurence cheerfully.

"Jump! Jump! Now!" cried a voice from the rocking boat. A strong, broad-shouldered man stood up in the boat, holding out his arms.

But it was Silas Wedderburn who jumped.

"Good heavens!" cried Laurence involuntarily. The man has saved himself at the expense of his little daughter's life. There was no more room in the boat; it hung rocking on the waves for a moment or two, and then sheered off; Laurence and the child were left behind.

Frances suddenly burst into tears.

"Don't cry, child," said Mr. Corbet, hurriedly, "I'll do the best I can for you. You shall be saved yet if I can manage it. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid," sobbed little Frances, "only—papa said he wouldn't leave me, and now—he's gone."

"Yes, gone—coward and traitor as he is," said Laurence bitterly, "and left you to my care, little one. But I won't desert you, you may be sure of that."

"Will you take care of me?" she said in a plaintive tone which went to his very heart. "But—if my papa did not care what became of me—why—why should you?"

"Because I am not a cur," said Laurence, savagely, "and because mine is not a valuable life, and I have not got any great work to do in the world, thank God! Stick to me, little Frances, and we shall be all right."

He took her up in his arms, and carried her to the other side of the ship. Most of the women and children had now left the vessel, and, to the joy and relief of all, land was certainly in sight. There was a better chance of life now than had once seemed possible for all. But the flames were sweeping over quite two-thirds of the ship by this time, and it was evident that the danger was still exceedingly great. Laurence waited for his turn, silently and sternly, with little Frances in his arms. He knew that she had a better chance of safety if he held her in this way than if he let her leap alone. The last boat was launched already.

At last his turn came. "Now, Frances, hold tight!" he said. Then came the leap into the boat—safely achieved. But Frances had fainted in his arms.

When she came to herself she was still lying in his arms, but they were rocking in a boat that seemed very small to her, considering the size of the one which they had left. She raised herself a little in his arms and looked about her. They were some distance from the burning ship, which looked now like a pyramid of fire. She shuddered and laid her head once more upon Laurence's shoulder. The action of trust made him feel very tenderly towards her.

"Do you think we shall find papa by and by?" she whispered in his ear.

"Can't tell, little one."

"Do you think he has got safe away?"

"I don't know, I don't much care."

"Oh!" she said with a little moan as if the words grieved her. "Oh, I hope he has got safe to land."

"Why need you care?" said Laurence almost angrily. "Do you not see what has happened? Child though you are, don't you understand? This man—your father—has abandoned you; he cared nothing for your life in comparison with his own. You belong to me more than you belong to him."

The child was crying quietly, but her arm tightened round his neck.

"Let us stick together, little Frances. I am a lonely man; you are a very lonely little woman. I will take care of you back to England; and if we meet your father again—well, we can then arrange matters. In the meantime I will be your guardian, and you must trust to me. Do you understand?"

"Will you love me?" said Frances.

"Yes, my child, I will."

It was a more solemn vow than little Frances knew, and Laurence Corbet told himself that he was willing to fulfil it to his life's end. He had nothing on earth to care for—save one eccentric old lady in England, who was his aunt and loved him in her own eccentric way—and he might as well take upon himself the care of this little girl, who



was peculiarly to be pitied, seeing that her own father had preferred to save his own life rather than hers—virtually abandoning her, therefore, to the kindly offices of the first stranger who concerned himself on her behalf.

“She is mine,” said Laurence, drawing his brows together in stern reprobation of that unnatural father, “and no one shall take her from me unless I choose.”

## CHAPTER IV.

## THE WANDERER'S RETURN.

"So at last, Laurence, you have come home again!"

It was Miss Keturah Kettlewell who spoke. She was little changed from the day on which she had first taken Lavinia Wedderburn, Number Sixty-Three, as her companion; and yet nearly ten years had rolled over her gray head since that time, and her eyes were as bright and keen as ever. Her face might indeed be more colorless, more wrinkled, her hair a thought whiter than in days of yore, but these indications of age did not force themselves on the casual observer. Laurence Corbet indeed, told her that she was looking younger than ever.

"I should hope not," she observed, grimly enough. "I am seventy years old and not long for this world. I am glad you have come back."

"But I have been 'back' a good many times during the last few years," said Laurence with a laugh.

"For a few days at a time—yes. But now I hear that you have come to stay; to make your home at Denstone, really to give yourself up to the business of life."

There was a rather mocking smile upon her nephew's lips. "Isn't it rather late for me to talk about the business of life. I am forty-three—quite antediluvian. What should I do now that I have not already done?"

"Marry," said Miss Kettlewell, pounding the floor with her stick.

"I shall never marry."

"And pray, why not, Laurence? If the loss of Justine Spenceley weighs upon you still so heavily—"

"Not at all, my dear aunt. I am glad you mentioned her. I found myself the other day vainly endeavoring to recollect her name."

"Then you are quite at liberty to marry?"

He shook his head. "I am quite happy as I am. And I have my ward to look after; she gives me plenty of occupation—plenty of satisfaction, too." A very tender smile played for a moment upon his lips as he said the words.

"The girl, Frances. Frances what, by the way?"

"Frances Corbet."

"It is useless to try to humbug me, Laurence. That girl can't be a relation of ours. There is no connection by which it is possible that she should bear your name."

"I never said she was a relation of mine," said Mr. Corbet gravely, "in fact, she is nothing of the kind, Aunt Keturah. I took charge of her once on board ship; she lost her parents, and finding that she seemed very much alone in the world, I resolved to adopt her. There is not even a mystery in the matter."

"But what is her real name?"

"That it is not necessary for me to tell you," said her nephew imperturbably. "It is a good name enough; she is of very respectable origin; but it has hitherto suited me better to introduce her to people under my own name than her own. But there is really no story that I could not tell all Rushton, if I chose."

"People will say unpleasant things, you know."

"I don't think they will if you and I vouch for her, Aunt Keturah. And I am sure you will take my word for it, that she is all right."

"Well, if you say so, I'm bound to believe you," said Miss Kettlewell, reluctantly. "Though I must tell you that your behavior, Laurence, will very much affect the dispositions of my will."

"How is that?" said her nephew, nonchalantly. "I really don't desire to have any interest in your will, my dear aunt."

"Then you ought to desire it," said the old lady sharply. "Laurence, I always meant to leave you all my money."

"Pray don't. I have quite enough as it is. I really have a difficulty in getting through it."

"You need not have difficulty. There are always plenty of poor people. If you had married, Laurence, I should have had no hesitation. I should have left King's Leigh—and the money—to your children. But I am not going to leave it to this girl, Frances, who comes from nobody knows where."

"Well, there is no necessity for you to leave it to Frances. I have enough of my own to provide for her."

"Yes, I shall leave that to you," said Miss Kettlewell significantly. "But the question is, what am I to do with mine?"

There was a little pause, and then Laurence said smilingly:

"Leave it to the Flemings, of course."

"I don't know," said his aunt, undecidedly. "I used to say that nothing would induce me—but I must acknowledge that Chloe has grown into a very pretty girl, and Milly is not so pert as she used to be. Dear, dear, what a time it seems since I boxed Chloe's ears!"

"You boxed Chloe's ears!" exclaimed Laurence, with a certain indignation in his tone.

"Indeed I did. And I had to apologize to the little minx—for minx she was, although she may be a beauty now—before she would enter the house again. But I bear her no malice. She is a pretty creature."

"And Milly?"

"Milly is a wild thing who will calm down in a year or two. Yes, I like those girls better than I ever thought to have done. At one time, you know, I did not mean to leave anything to them at all. I had my eye on the County Hospital, the Children's Hospital in London, the Home for Sick Animals—"

"Heavens!" said Laurence, suddenly starting from his seat. "What is that?"

There was certainly a curious noise outside the door.

But Miss Kettlewell listened to it undisturbed. "It is Jim," she said, "he always sneezes in that way when he wants a door opened. Perhaps you would be so kind, Laurence, as to open it."

Laurence opened it, in wonder; whereupon, in stalked an enormous black and white cat, with a peculiar face, half of its nose very white and half black, as if it had been divided down the middle. His chest and feet were also white, but the rest of his fur was of the glossiest black.

"This is Jim," said Miss Kettlewell, placidly, "Peter, whom you may remember, died some years ago. You will like Jim. He is the most maudlingly affectionate animal that ever lived. Look at him now—sitting there, eyeing me, and slobbering with love."

"I admire Jim," said Laurence. "A capacity for affection is a great gift. Peter was always too discriminating and too haughty for me."

"Jim is neither the one nor the other," said Miss Kettlewell. "I thought once of endowing a Home for Cats."

"I shall contest the will, if you do," said her nephew, who had meanwhile patted his knee and brought the affectionate Jim to the level of his shoulder. "You're an odd beast," he said to the cat, whose paws already tenderly encircled his throat, and who was kissing his cheek with avidity.

"That's not his greatest proof of affection," said Miss Kettlewell contentedly. "When he's really fond of you, he gently—very gently—bites your nose. But to return to the subject of my money, Laurence—"

"Oh, bother, why don't you leave it all to Miss Wedderburn?" said Laurence, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I intend to do no such thing," said Miss Kettlewell, with dignity. "If I do not leave it to my relations, I shall leave it to charities. Lavinia Wedderburn has no claim on me."

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"Where did you pick her up?" said Laurence, looking attentively at the cat.

"I advertised. I had three hundred answers at least. I interviewed sixty-two; Miss Wedderburn was the sixty-third. I felt, Laurence, that I was not equal to the task of interviewing any more. I engaged the sixty-third, almost irrespective of her merits, and she has suited me very well."

"She has been with you now about ten years, I think."

"Quite ten years. Yes," said Miss Kettlewell, meditatively, "she came to me before that dreadful shipwreck, which you wrote to me about from San Francisco. Her cousin must have been on board with you; did you know him?"

"He cannot have been on board more than a day or two, for we took him up half way. I vaguely remember him," said Laurence, coolly, "but of course I saw very little of him."

"I suppose he was steerage or something of that sort," said Miss Kettlewell, contemptuously. "They are nothing of a family, although Lavinia is always trying to make out that they are so well connected! She had a great belief in her cousin at one time, but I think it's gone off since he has been in the neighborhood and taken so little notice of her."

"In the neighborhood!" said Laurence Corbet, with emphasis. "Do you mean to say that Silas Wedderburn has turned up in this part of the world?"

"Why not? Yes, he has lately settled at Rushton, in charge of a chapel there."

"He has not gone out to the South Seas again?"

"No, he seemed to take a dislike to the South Seas after that shipwreck—so Lavinia tells me, and I do not wonder at it. Why, you yourself, Laurence, don't seem to have cared for the sea quite so much since you were nearly burnt to death."

Laurence laughed good-humoredly. There were cer-

tain sections of his life which he never described in detail to Miss Kettlewell; that fire at sea came into one of them.

"I have never heard of Mr. Wedderburn from that day to this," he said, "what has been his history?"

"I don't think he's had a history," said Aunt Keturah briskly. "He did not quite please the committee that sent him out, in one way or another. They refused to give him authority to do anything; and Lavinia tells me that the loss of his wife and little girl affected him so much that his health broke down, and he could not work for a time."

"Ah, that was sad!" said Mr. Corbet, and his aunt wondered why he spoke in so cynical a tone.

"He had a chapel in some northern place for a time, and became quite celebrated among the Dissenters for his preaching; then that grew too hard for him, and he settled down at Rushton about a year ago, and has been in high favor with the tradespeople and folks of that sort ever since he came. Derrick—you remember Derrick, the miller? He's the great man at Mr. Wedderburn's Little Bethel."

"Derrick wasn't a bad sort," said Mr. Corbet, reflectively.

"He's made a fortune at any rate," remarked his aunt, nodding her old head at him. "He sent his son to Oxford; the young fellow's just back again and as handsome and gentlemanly a man as you ever saw. I heard—" but there she stopped.

"What did you hear, Aunt Keturah?"

"Oh, nothing."

"You must tell me, after that preface. 'Nothing' is always exciting. Let me guess; he is in love with some girl who is either much above or below him in station?"

"Not a bad guess," said Miss Kettlewell, complacently, as if she had made it herself. "But the girl is said to be Chloe Fleming. I think he looks high."

"Money goes to money. Leave yours to Chloe, and

some time—a hundred years hence, I hope—they will be well matched.”

“I’d sooner leave it to the Cat’s Hospital,” said Miss Kettlewell.

An interruption occurred at this moment, in the shape of Miss Wedderburn, who still filled the office of Miss Kettlewell’s companion. She was older and grayer and stiffer than when she first came to King’s Leigh, but she preserved the elegance of her demeanor which was enhanced by the costly and becoming dresses that she wore. Miss Kettlewell herself did not dress well, but she liked to see those about her well-dressed. “They ought to look as if they were properly paid,” she said to herself. She noticed on this occasion, that Laurence gave Miss Wedderburn a keen look, and drew his eyebrows together as if something in her appearance did not please him. And yet, as Miss Kettlewell thought, surveying her companion from a little distance, with a sort of proprietary interest, Lavinia had seldom looked so well.

Miss Wedderburn and Mr. Corbet exchanged remarks.

The old lady, in her lace and brocade, looked at them, and formed plans for their matrimonial happiness. Lavinia was destined ultimately to become the bride of the Reverend Silas Wedderburn; Miss Kettlewell had already settled upon the wedding present which would be most appropriate. If Silas did not come to the point very soon, she meant to send for him and harangue him on the propriety of a marriage with his cousin. Then Laurence—well, of course he ought to marry Chloe Fleming. Chloe was just the girl that he would like. And as for that troublesome ward of his—Frances, was she called?—why, Andrew Derrick, the miller’s son, was the very match for her. And then Miss Keturah fell to devising plans for Milly; for, as may be easily seen, she was a thorough-going match-maker at heart.

Meanwhile, Mr. Corbet was quietly obtaining information. He had heard of Mr. Wedderburn; so Mr. Wedder-



burn has really settled down at Rushton, that quiet little place; and how did he like it?

Very well, Miss Wedderburn opined. The people were very kind to him.

"He does not think of going abroad again?"

"No, he does not. His nerves were terribly shaken by a fire on board ship, where he lost his little girl. And his wife had been buried only a few weeks before. It was a very sad thing."

"Mr. Wedderburn was probably much attached to his wife and child?"

"Oh, very much so," said Lavinia.

Laurence's lips tightened. He did not speak for a minute or two.

"And he means to live in Rushton?"

"Yes," said Miss Wedderburn, her eyes brightening. "His congregation have subscribed to give him a good house and furniture; he will want for nothing—the people are so fond of him.... Indeed, he is a most eloquent man. I have often tried to induce dear Miss Kettlewell to go and hear him, but she cannot be persuaded."

"I am too old to run after new lights," said Miss Kettlewell. "But I want to see your cousin. You should bring him here to see Laurence. I don't mind how often he comes, remember. You must invite him—from me."

Laurence stood up abruptly. One would have said that he was at the end of his patience; but what had he to be impatient about? He said that it was late—that he must go. Miss Kettlewell heard him affectionately; Jim clung to him with all his claws and could hardly be dissevered from his coat, then fell to sneezing violently at the door. Miss Wedderburn hardly knew whether to be cordial or cold.

"By Jove, this is a pretty tangle!" said Laurence, as he rode away from the house. "Here have I brought Frances to Denstone and given out that I mean to live at home for the future—and have walked straight into the lion's

den! Who would have thought that Silas Wedderburn would have turned up at Rushton! I have avoided Denstone all these years, knowing that Miss Wedderburn was a relation of his, but I thought that ten years would have made us safe. Poor Frances! I cannot hope that she will not recognize her father—his name and identity are too surely stamped upon her memory for forgetfulness.

“What shall I do? I must warn her, I think. I would sooner not bring the old scenes to her mind, but as her father is so near, it would not be safe to keep her in ignorance. But if I had known that Silas Wedderburn was at Rushton, I would never have brought her home. Fortunately, he has no legal claim upon her now, and the moral claim he himself flung away when he preferred his own life to hers. But it is an unlucky business.”

For Laurence had carefully kept his ward out of the way of persons who might be likely to inquire into her history and circumstances. While Frances was still a child, she had been his companion on many a long journey; and when she grew older, she had been left at school, first in England, and then in France, so that she might receive the best education that Laurence Corbet knew how to give. His knowledge that Miss Wedderburn was the cousin of Silas, had impelled him to this course. Had she not been his aunt's companion, he would have brought Frances to Denstone long before. But he was afraid lest the Wedderburns should lay claim to the child whom Silas had so cruelly abandoned, and he had resolved that he would never give them the chance. For this reason, he had kept Frances away from his own home, and had dowered her with his surname instead of the name of Wedderburn.

But now Frances was nineteen, and he could not very well keep her longer at school. She herself had begun to be anxious to take her place and do her work in the world. She had even suggested that, as she had no money of her own, she should become a governess and relieve Mr. Corbet of the burden of her support; Laurence had negatived

this proposition, but it had made him feel that she was not a school-girl any longer. He must look out for some way of launching her in the world.

The best way seemed to be to bring her to Denstone, and install her in his old house with a suitable chaperon, who had been found in the person of Mrs. Lester, a distant cousin of the Corbet family. Miss Wedderburn would not know her—he was sure of that; but it was quite a new factor in the business that Silas should have settled at Rush-ton. Denstone was six miles away from Rushton—that was a comfort; but Laurence felt that he had landed himself in a difficulty, from which it was probable that only Frances's own good sense could extricate him. But he had great faith in Frances's good sense; and he resolved to confide in her as soon as ever he could see her alone.

## CHAPTER V.

## FRANCES.

As Laurence rode up to his house, which was a low red building half smothered in ivy, he saw a white figure flitting about the flower borders of the garden and guessed at once that Frances had taken upon herself the congenial task of arranging the vases for the drawing-room. He was often surprised to find her so simple, so natural, in her tastes; in spite of the roving life that she had led, she was as pleased as possible to settle down in a quiet English home and accommodate herself to the ordinary life of an English girl. She had lived in Germany and Italy and France, only spending a few weeks now and then at an English watering-place with her guardian—"Cousin Laurence" as she usually called him—and she had been educated according to Mr. Corbet's ideas, but not in the conventional manner of modern school-girls. Thus she could speak three languages fluently, but she had learned only enough geography and arithmetic as would be absolutely necessary to her in ordinary life; she could sing to guitar or zither, but she could not play the piano, and she could not draw or paint at all. But she was a skilled housewife and needlewoman, and she could ride, row or walk all day and dance all night without being tired in the least. She had a splendid constitution and a very clear and well-balanced mind, and Laurence himself had trained her to read history and philosophy with him and to know a great deal about the best Art and the best music, so that although she neither executed feeble water-color sketches nor hammered the keys of a piano, she might be termed an extremely well-educated girl.

But Frances had no high ideas of her own attainments,

and she had had a conversation about them with Mrs. Lester that morning, which had somewhat depressed her. As she came across the lawn to meet her guardian, he noticed that there was a troubled look in her hazel eyes, a line on her forehead which he was not accustomed to see there. She had more than fulfilled the promise of her childhood, for she had grown into a very beautiful girl, tall, graceful, with clearly-cut features and a peculiar creamy paleness of complexion which deepened into a rose flush only when she was excited either by pleasure or by grief. The features had indeed altered little, but a great change in her appearance had been effected when she first swept up her bronze waves of hair into a big coil at the back of her head—a change so great that Laurence felt certain that no one could recognize the pale child of nine in the stately young lady of nineteen. He felt re-assured as he looked at her. Neither Mr. or Miss Wedderburn surely, could claim her now.

But she was flushed and disturbed, and he wondered what was the matter, as she silently put her hand within his arm and walked over the lawn with him. He asked no questions, he knew that he should hear in good time all that she had to say! Frances kept no secrets from him.

"Cousin Laurence, am I very different from other girls?" she asked at length.

"Only in being more sensible—and perhaps prettier—than the others, my dear."

"Oh, please don't talk nonsense," said Frances, "I want to know, for Mrs. Lester is so much surprised because I cannot play on the piano; I said that if it had been necessary for me to play on the piano, you would have had me taught, and then I came into the garden, because I felt angry. But I was not rude or unkind to her, you know, Cousin Laurence; I hope you understand that."

"I understand perfectly. There is not the least reason in the world why you should play the piano. I hate smatterings. You have learned the things that will be

useful to you, why should you waste your time on superfluities?"

"It is difficult to know what will be useful to one," said Frances, hesitating a little. "Mrs. Lester seemed to think that music was indispensable."

"I would rather you were a good cook," said Mr. Corbet.

"Yes, I am sure that would be more useful than piano playing," said the girl, with perfect simplicity. "And I can sew very well and make my own dresses, and—"

"And play a good hand at whist," said Laurence, "which is perhaps more useful than all the other things we have mentioned."

"You are never serious," said Frances, reprovingly, "when I want to talk to you about my future."

"Did you want to talk to me about your future? Well, that is really curious, Frances, for so did I."

"I shall soon be twenty, you know; I feel, Cousin Laurence, that I am growing very old."

"A perfect Methuselah."

"Do listen, Cousin Laurence, and be grave for a minute or two. I have been thinking over my capabilities, because I want to decide how I can best earn my own living."

"Do what?" said Laurence. She had no reason to complain of his want of seriousness now. He looked almost angry.

"Work for myself; earn my own living. Be independent," Frances explained.

"Independent—of me?"

The tone was hurt and indignant. But Frances continued, quite simply and naturally, as though she were saying the only thing that could be expected of her.

"You have always been so good to me, all through these years," she said, "giving me so many things, teaching me so much, and showing the world so delightfully, and now bringing me to your own beautiful English home, that I begin to be afraid that I have sometimes seemed selfish, in

taking everything as a matter of course. Selfish and—ungrateful, perhaps—”

“Never, Frances; never, my dear child. You pain me when you talk in this way.”

“I am very sorry. I would do anything rather than pain you. But—Cousin Laurence, you must let me speak out. I can’t be happy until I do, and I know you like me to be happy.”

“You are right there,” said Laurence, trying to recover his lightness of tone. “So go straight on, Frank, and justify the name I gave you years ago.”

“You often reproach me with over-frankness,” said the girl, turning her hazel eyes upon him, “and yet I remember that you used to say I could not be too frank with you.”

“Perhaps I did,” said her guardian rather ruefully, “but I am not quite of the same opinion now. Come into the shrubbery; there is a seat there, and I can bear your frankness better when I am sitting down than when I am walking about.”

“It is nothing so very dreadful, my frankness!” said Frances, almost indignantly. “I was only going to tell you that I had not forgotten what I resolved a long time ago—when we first came to England, I think.”

“When you had reached the mighty age of twelve; well, what was your resolution?”

“It was then that you enquired about my father, and could hear nothing of him,” said Frances, with reddening cheek and tear-filled eye. “You told me that he had completely disappeared, and that you were not going to look for him any more—”

“And that you were my child and that I should act towards you as a father or an elder brother ought to act, was not that what I said, Frances?” Laurence asked, taking her hand in his as they sat together on a rustic bench in the shrubbery where the sunshine turned the overhanging beech leaves into a canopy of gold.

"Yes, and I was very, very glad and very grateful; but—"

"Well, what does the 'but' mean? Have you ceased to care for your old guardian; is that what you wish me to understand?"

"Oh, no, Cousin Laurence, no! I could never, never cease to care for you. It is because I care for you that I resolved not to be a burden on you when I was old enough to work for myself; and I think that the time has come—"

"For you to leave me, Frances? To go out into the world and earn your own living, you foolish child? And what is to become of me?"

"You are always good and kind to me," said the girl, looking at him with candid eyes, grown suddenly tender, "but I cannot flatter myself that I am necessary to your existence, Cousin Laurence. Why, think of the months when I was at school in different places! And now that you are at your own home again, you will have many more interests than you had before; you will go into Parliament, perhaps, or be a magistrate—" she laughed a little at the thought—"and at the right times of the year you will shoot and fish and Frances will only be a burden to you and no use in the world at all."

"Did I ever find Frances a burden to me?"

"You never showed it, if you did. I don't think you ever did—when I was a child. But now that I am grown up I can see that I may be a trouble to you in many ways."

"Don't you think you had better wait for me to tell you so?"

"You never would, dear Cousin Laurence—I hope you will always let me call you by that name—you would sooner suffer the greatest inconvenience than give me a moment's pain. You see how well I know you. So do let me go away and earn my own living instead of burdening you any longer."

Laurence looked at her intently. The flushed cheek and kindling eyes showed him that she was thoroughly in



earnest, and from the moment that he was convinced of this fact, he altered his tone completely.

"And do you think it would be right, Frances," he said, laying his hand for one moment on hers, "to deprive me of all the pleasure and comfort that I have hoped from your presence—here in the old house, where there is no one to care for me? I have looked forward for years to this time, when you would make a home of the place, and teach me to love it as I loved it when I was a boy. For this, in some ways, I must confess that I brought you up—in the hope that as you grew older, you would see in me a friend whom—at least—you did not wish to leave."

Frances put her hand up to her eyes. "Ah, if you always felt in that way, it would be easy. But, Cousin Laurence, suppose—suppose changes were to come—"

Her guardian started up. "Somebody has been talking to you!" he said. "Now, Frank, speak the truth; Mrs. Lester has been saying that I might get married one of these days, and where would you be then?"

His pleasant smile broadened into a laugh, as Frances blushed and looked away.

"Mrs. Lester is a chattering old woman," he said, "and I will not have you listening to her in preference to me. I assure you that I don't mean to bring a new mistress to Denstone, and if I ever contemplate such a desperate step, I will consult you first."

Frances's lip curled a little. "Will you be guided by my choice? I doubt it."

"Wait till the time comes. Now I have news for you, which you would have heard sooner but for your utterly unreasonable proposal to earn your own living."

"Good news?"

"Well—I am afraid not, Frances."

"Sit down and tell me. I think—you must have heard of my father." Her voice sank, and the color left her cheek.

"Yes, that is what I have done. We have often spoken

of what we should do if he were to appear on the scene, Frances, but I did not expect to find ourselves in such close quarters with him as we are now."

"Where is he?" she asked, her eyes fixed upon her hands, which were tightly clasped together in her lap.

"He is at Rushton—six miles away."

"But what is he doing there?"

"He has a chapel—a charge. They say he is liked and respected—gets good congregations and so on."

"I believe he was very eloquent," said Frances, still looking down. "I remember some of his speeches—and sermons—even now."

"Yes, he had that gift," said Mr. Corbet, dryly.

They had never made it a rule to keep silence between themselves concerning the manner of Silas Wedderburn's escape from the burning ship. Laurence could not do other than speak contemptuously of him from time to time; Frances, as she grew older, tried sometimes, but vainly, to defend his conduct. But it had made a great impression upon her; she had been old enough to understand the extent of its cowardice; and it had deprived her of every vestige of love for him which as a child she had possessed. But now, hearing that he was so near, she tried to frame some excuse for the past.

"I think," she said, slowly, "that he was mad with terror, and did not know what he said or did. A man should not be condemned for what is perhaps only the result of—temperament."

"Oh, we all know the ways by which cowards justify their cowardice," said Laurence, scornfully. "Don't begin to defend him to me, Frances; you know what I think of the man. The question is: what are we going to do?"

"We are surely not likely to meet?"

"No, possibly not. But think of remote chances. He may meet you in the street, or sit opposite you at a public meeting, and trace some resemblance. Are you like your mother, Frances?"

"I think not. She was very fair and small."

"Ah!" said Laurence, somewhat surprised. "I thought you must be like her because you are so unlike your father. And I took a good look at your father's cousin who is, you know, my aunt's companion; and I could not see the slightest likeness to you there."

"I must be like some far away ancestor—if I have any ancestors," said Frances. "At any rate, I don't think that either my father or my Cousin Lavinia would know me, if they met me in the street."

"In that case, we need not tell them, of course."

Laurence spoke rather questioningly, and Frances looked at him in some surprise.

"Oh!" she said.

"Why need we say a word? They will only trouble and embarrass you. They are not likely to guess the truth: that Miss Corbet of Denstone is Frances Wedderburn."

"But I thought you always said that if you found my father, you would speak to him about me—so that his mind might be relieved."

"I shall wait to see whether his mind wants relieving, first. No, Frank; I don't want to tell him anything about you. I am afraid he and his cousin would be perpetual thorns in your side. They may be excellent people in their way," he hastened to add, seeing a cloud of perplexity on her brow; "but you have been brought up very differently from the way in which they would have brought you up; and there would be perpetual friction and unhappiness."

"It is not that I want to see anything of them," said Frances, slowly, "for my father cannot have loved me very much, if he abandoned me in that way and Cousin Lavinia was not kind to mother or to me; it is only that I thought it might be my duty—"

"You will end by being a martyr to your sense of duty," said Laurence, affectionately. "You are quite morbid on that point. Well, I have no authority over you—"

"Oh, yes, indeed you have!"

"I have neither legal claim nor authority, mademoiselle. You are free to go to your father or stay with me."

"Cousin Laurence, you are unkind!"

"If you want me to be kind," said Laurence, with a sudden softening of his voice, and of his expressive eyes, "you must tell me that you will stay."

"You really wish me to stay?"

"I think there is nothing I wish for so much in the whole wide world."

It was almost like a renewal of that first promise of friendship and faithfulness when Laurence Corbet held the lonely child to his breast on board the boat as it sped away from the flaming ship long years ago. But it seemed to Frances as if there was a new and curious thrill in Laurence's voice, and as if his eyes had grown strangely tender as they rested on her face. Her own voice trembled a little as she replied:

"Then I will stay."

## CHAPTER VI.

## THE FIRST MEETING.

"I think," said Frances, gravely, "that it is time I knew some English girls."

"Has Mrs. Lester again been lecturing you on your unlikeness to other people?" said Laurence Corbet, laughing.

"Not exactly, but I feel as if she meant me to take to heart some of the observations she makes. She says that I need 'young' society."

"I must ask her to make these observations to me and to me only."

"No, don't, Cousin Laurence. I like to hear her talk; she gives me new ideas. She seems to have led a life where everybody always did the correct thing. I don't think I should like it; it sounds rather dull; but I like to hear about it."

She was sitting with her guardian in the shrubbery again; but it was after dinner, in the sweet, summer dusk, and Mr. Corbet was smoking a cigar. Laurence lazily reflected that Mrs. Lester, a widowed relation of his family, was perhaps not so harmless a person as she had at first appeared. She meant well, but she did not seem very wise.

"I'll tell you what we must do," he said, after a little pause. "The Flemings called the other day when we were out. We must return their call. There are two girls, you know—distant cousins of mine, second cousins once removed of my Aunt, Miss Keturah Kettlewell. Her second cousin married a very nice woman, but one whom Aunt Keturah did not care about; and she has never taken to the girls exactly."

"What are they like? Are they nice girls?" said Frances, with brightening eyes.

"I have not seen much of them since they were children. They were pretty little things, then. We will go to-morrow, if you like—ride over to tea, and take Miss Kettlewell and King's Leigh on our way back."

"Must I go there?" said Frances, recoiling a little.

"Why not?"

"My cousin—Miss Wedderburn—"

"You say she is not likely to know you. You will be obliged to meet her sometimes, you know, so you need not mind and might as well make a beginning."

"I suppose so."

"You know, Frances," said Laurence very gently, "that I would not for one moment keep you from your own people if I thought you would be happy with them."

"I know—I quite understand."

"See them for yourself; then you will be quite sure."

But he could not fathom all the mysteries of a young girl's mind. Frances was very sensible, very clear-sighted; she had fully recognized that her father had been guilty of an act of the meanest nature when he took her place in the boat that was meant for her, she could not be true to the higher instincts of her nature and exonerate him. Yet, in spite of this condemnation of his action, she had an occasional desire to know more of him; he might be cowardly, but he was her father after all. She could not honestly have said that she had any affection for him, but it made her a little unhappy now and then to know that he lived and had cared for her so slightly. The remembrance of him had given her a feeling of repulsion from all persons who professed a great deal, all who claimed to possess an unusual amount of compassion for others or posed as professional philanthropists. Indeed, she had a touch of cynicism in her composition although she did not know it, and although it would have been hard to discover by her friends to whom she was always gentle and kind. But

Laurence Corbet had distinguished its growth, and was somewhat surprised and secretly disturbed by it, for men seldom like to see cynicism in a woman, although they may have done their utmost to produce it. And Laurence Corbet was certainly responsible for this turn of Frances's mind, for he had not spared her his opinion of her father, or of other men who valued their own lives more than honor, their own safety rather than that of wife or child.

Thus he was glad that she should express a desire to know the Flemings, whom he had always liked, and hoped that she would make friends with the girls. They were sure to be worth knowing, he said to himself, having been brought up by Margaret Fleming, a gentle, gracious-mannered woman, whom everyone but Miss Kettlewell admired. And it was with some pleasurable anticipation, as well as some little anxiety, that he set off with Frances on the following afternoon, to call at Dr. Fleming's house.

Frances looked well on horseback. The graceful figure was shown to advantage by her close-fitting habit; the clear complexion glowed beneath the plain dark hat: and her bronze hair took on tints of gold in the sunshine. Laurence Corbet was a remarkably distinguished-looking man, with something of a foreign appearance in the cut of his pointed beard; and the two were sufficiently handsome and unlike other people to excite a good deal of interest as they rode into the little country town of Rushton, six miles from Mr. Corbet's house. King's Leigh was on the very outskirts of Rushton and the Fleming's house was in Rushton itself.

The town was small but ancient and possessed some monuments of antiquity, which Laurence pointed out as they rode through the quaint narrow streets, paved with cobble stones, which, in many cases, were named after the orders of monks who had once clustered round the fine old parish church. Friarsgate, Whitefriars Lane, Blackfriars Street, Monk's Way, were well known thoroughfares in Rushton. The church was a magnificent structure, cele-

brated all over England, and as Frances drew rein and looked up to its lofty tower, which could be seen for miles round and served as a beacon in days gone by, she could not forbear a rather odd remark—odd, at least, it appeared to Laurence Corbet at her side.

"I wonder that there is any need for smaller places, chapels, and little strange churches, under the shadow of a tower like that."

"You must not let the Rushton people hear you say so," said Laurence, lightly. "I hear there is a plethora of places of worship in the town. Here apparently comes one of the persons chiefly concerned— Ah!"

He broke off with a low-toned exclamation as the man in clerical dress on whom his eye had rested came nearer. He was crossing the grassy space, dotted with grave-stones here and there, round the church, by means of a paved pathway, which led to the gate at which Frances and her guardian had halted, so that his face was fully turned towards them as he walked. Laurence glanced at Frances, and wished that they had not paused. For he saw at once that she, like himself, suspected—even if she were not quite certain—that they were face to face with Silas Wedderburn.

Her father, was this man her father? He wore black garments and white linen of unimpeachable glossiness and respectability: his soft felt hat was quite the right thing: his gloves and silver-mounted umbrella and well-polished boots would have done credit to the highest dignitary in the land: and yet Frances's heart sank as she looked at him. This was not the enthusiastic, long-haired visionary of her dreams, when she had thought of her father in the most favorable light: this was a stout man who looked as if he liked to be comfortable; whose face was pale and rather flabby, whose wide nostrils and loose, hanging lips suggested an admirable appreciation for the good things of this life. And yet—there was a likeness not to be denied. The features were good, the fine eyes could not be mistaken: the



personality of the man was still there, although, in some remarkable way, obscured and coarsened and sunk to lower levels, undreamt of in the past. It struck Laurence as possible that Silas Wedderburn had been so degraded in his own eyes by the act of cowardice of which he had been guilty, that all effort after higher things had henceforth appeared unattainable. He was no longer the champion of an oppressed race, or the leader of a new colony in a new land; he was the sleek, comfortable-looking, much-petted minister of a little community in Zion Lane, and liked the post better than that of missionary and pioneer.

Frances had grown very pale. She stared so fixedly at the advancing black figure, that Mr. Wedderburn thought he saw recognition in her eyes, and lifted his hand to his shapeless black hat. But before he had actually raised it, she gave her horse a sharp stroke with her whip and wheeled round, taking the direction that first offered and which chanced to be the right one. Laurence followed her, making his way with some difficulty to her side.

"We need not come into Rushton very often," he said quietly. "Or—we can go abroad again if you prefer it."

She did not answer immediately. When she did, her words seemed wide of the mark. With head erect, and a proud light in her eyes, she said clearly and bitterly: "So that is the man who left his child to be drowned or burned!"

Then she set her lips tightly together, and said no more; Laurence also was silent, as they made their way across the market-place and over an old stone bridge, to a broad old-fashioned street of private houses alternating with shops, to the iron gate which bore on it a brass plate with the name of Thomas Fleming, M. D.

The house and street were strange to Frances's wondering eyes. The street was not even picturesque: it was prosaic and commonplace: the shops were small and poor, and the other houses had a pinched and meager look: Dr. Fleming's house was one of the largest, but it was not very large.

It was built of dark red brick and stood back from the street, with a lawn between its front door and the pavement. The windows and door were narrow and neat and clean, but the sober-hued walls and dark paint made the house look dull.

A man came out and took the horses, then Laurence and his ward entered the house and were ushered into a little drawing-room, which was delightfully cool and still. "Mrs. Fleming is in the garden, sir: I'll tell her," said the maid, who seemed to know Mr. Corbet by sight: and forthwith she disappeared for a minute or two. Frances was very silent and grave: Laurence took the opportunity to place one hand on her arm, in a caressing way.

"Don't be cast down, Frank," he said.

"I am not cast down. I knew it all before," she returned, trying to keep a quiver out of her voice.

"Don't grieve over the inevitable, then," he said, drawing away his hand.

"I have nothing to grieve for, I suppose," she answered. But there was a little dreariness in the tone. Laurence Corbet wished, for one moment, that he could have kept her in ignorance of her father's act of cowardice. He had never regretted it before.

"My dear Laurence!" said someone at the door, and he turned at once, while Frances strained her eyes to see the person who entered and spoke so sweetly. It was the pleasantest voice, she thought, that she had ever heard. "My dear Laurence, I am so glad to see you! How good of you to come to-day! And this is your ward? We have all been wanting to make her acquaintance. How are you, my dear? And what am I to call her, Laurence?"

"Frances, please," said the girl, with a sudden thrill of pleasure and gratitude. She let both her hands be taken, and did not draw herself away when Mrs. Fleming bent forward and kissed her, although she was not at all used to being kissed. She did not know that there was something

a little drooping and forlorn in her attitude which had excited the pity of Mrs. Fleming's motherly heart.

"Come out into the garden. We are all there, having tea under the mulberry tree, and the girls have been playing tennis with Andrew Derrick. You remember the Derricks, Laurence?"

"Oh, yes," said Laurence, with a covert smile, as he followed his hostess and his ward to the garden. For he remembered also what Miss Kettlewell had said concerning Chloe. "They have got on in the world, haven't they? Andrew has been to Oxford, I hear."

"Yes, Andrew has been to Oxford," said Mrs. Fleming, and there was a touch of reserve in her voice, as if something in Mr. Corbet's tone had not pleased her. She was a tall, fair woman, with a sweet plain face, which her husband and daughters thought beautiful—a woman whose eyes beamed kindness upon all the world, and whose mouth was never opened save to speak good words. It was the intense motherliness of her look and manner which took Frances's heart by storm: and she was quite ready in five minutes to join Chloe and Millicent in declaring that their mother was the loveliest woman they had ever seen. She had the gift of a natural grace which Chloe had inherited: Chloe's soft waving fair hair was also like her mother's; but Chloe was really beautiful, as Frances was quick to see; and Milly was the most charming and wayward little maiden of eighteen that anyone could wish to meet upon a summer's day.

Frances was astonished at the difference between the front of the house and the back. She was led through a large room, about twice the size of the drawing-room, with long windows opening upon a large garden and a long green tennis lawn. The flower beds were bright with leaf and blossom: the walls of the house and garden were covered with roses and Virginia creeper; the eye looked out on a perfect bower of greenery. A tea-table was set under a venerable mulberry tree, not far from the house, and here

Chloe's graceful figure, all in white, was bending over the cups, and Milly's curly head bobbed up and down as she played with her pet terrier, whom she was inciting to perform a variety of antics for the diversion of their visitor, Mr. Andrew Derrick, the miller's son.

Laurence looked at young Derrick with some curiosity, remembering his father as a very rough diamond indeed; but he acknowledged rather grudgingly, that the young fellow had got some polish, at the University or elsewhere, and that he was not bad looking. Andrew was tall and well-made; he had a bright, handsome face, and laughing brown eyes, which seemed to follow Chloe whithersoever she went; but Chloe's eyes were generally downcast, so that she did not seem to observe his watchfulness.

Frances was introduced and heartily welcomed. They accepted her naturally and willingly as a sort of new cousin, and lavished every possible attention upon her. And in a very short time, the girl was perfectly happy. It was a new sensation to her to be with young English girls, and she felt at home with them at once. She was not shy, but she did not always respond quickly to advances of friendship: and Laurence was amused to see her talking and laughing as freely and frankly as if she had known his cousins all her life. She liked them and they liked her—so much was evident. Laurence was pleased and satisfied.

"And you have scarcely lived in England at all?" he heard Milly saying, in tones of wonderment.

"Scarcely at all. And I think I have hardly ever talked to English girls of my own age before. Americans, French, Italians, Germans—but very, very few English."

"And yet you speak English all right!" said Milly, naively, provoking thereby a laugh from her immediate neighbors.

"But I am English," said Frances, laughing, too. Milly was childish for her age, and apt to ask awkward questions. But no one imagined what the next would be.

"You have no father or mother, have you?" she said. "That must make a great difference."

"Milly!" ejaculated her sister, in the softest possible warning voice; and even Mrs. Fleming was a little shocked by her spoilt child's abruptness, and tried to change the conversation. But Frances chose to answer: the meeting with her father that morning had stirred her nature to its depths.

"My mother is dead," she answered clearly, "but my father is living. But he did not care for me, and Mr. Corbet adopted me in his stead."

And only Laurence knew the pride and passion which lay behind those studiously cold and evenly spoken words.

## CHAPTER VII.

## FRANCES AND DREAMS.

Dr. Fleming came out from the dining-room, and his appearance was very welcome at that moment. He was a tall spare man with gray whiskers and keen blue eyes: he had a kindly humorous face, which was somehow reflected in Milly's infantine features—perhaps by reason of a similar expression—and a quick step which showed decision and activity of character. In his presence, conversation became at once more cheerful and more general.

"I have only ten minutes," he said, "so give me a cup of tea, Chloe, and then I'm afraid I must be off: I have to go to Creswick and shall not be back before nine."

There was an outcry of remonstrance from his daughters. "Oh, father, you promised to play a game with Andrew to-night!"

"Andrew must come another time," said the doctor, smiling at the young Oxford man. "Perhaps you can get Laurence to take his place, Milly, if you beg hard enough."

"Tennis is not my line," said Mr. Corbet, lazily.

"What is your line?" said the doctor. "What are you going to do with yourself now you are in England, Corbet? Stand for Parliament?"

"Maybe. There will be a vacancy before long, I hear."

"Yes, Dalton is retiring. Andrew, is it true that you Radicals mean to run a candidate?"

Andrew laughed. "I've heard something about it, but I don't believe it will come to much," he said.

"Ah, it's that parson at your father's chapel," said Dr. Fleming, good-humoredly. "He's quite a firebrand, I hear. He has been stirring up people right and left,

preaching revolutionary doctrines everywhere, and trying to get contributions towards the dockers' strike."

Laurence Corbet frowned to himself. It seemed fated that Silas Wedderburn's name should dominate the thoughts of Frances that afternoon. He almost hoped that she did not notice what was said. But she was not just then talking to Chloe, and Andrew Derrick's next words prevented any possibility of misunderstanding.

"You mean Wedderburn?" he said. "Yes, he has come recently, and seems popular. My father says he is a clever man. I heard him preach last Sunday."

"That was why you were not at the Parish Church," said Milly, accusingly. "I missed you, and so did Chloe. Did we not, Chloe? We both wondered where you were."

Andrew glanced at Chloe, whose cheeks had faintly reddened. He waited a moment, perhaps hoping that she would speak; but as she remained silent, he turned again to Dr. Fleming.

"The sermon was very eloquent and rather socialistic in tendency," he said. "I was interested, I confess, but not quite convinced."

"Ah, you thresh these subjects out amongst yourselves at the Union, I suppose," said the doctor, holding out his cup for a fresh supply of tea. "So Wedderburn is popular? Well, in this sleepy place, it is perhaps rather a good thing for people to be stirred up now and then. I see his name advertised as one of the speakers at a big public meeting next week."

"Yes, but I doubt if he will be there. My father said that Mr. Wedderburn had been complaining about his health—finds the air trying—thinks Rushton does not suit him, or that he has too much to do."

"Ah, not a strong man, I suppose," said the doctor shortly; and Andrew suddenly remembered that his father had told the minister to consult Dr. Fleming without delay. Perhaps he had done so, and Dr. Fleming was withheld by professional reasons from continuing the conver-

sation, for he turned rather abruptly to Laurence and began to discuss the state of politics in the country. Then, recalling the lapse of time, he jumped up and said that he must go.

"I hope we shall see you here very often," he said cordially to Frances. "My girls have been looking forward to your coming."

"Thank you, I shall be very glad to come," Frances said with her accustomed directness.

"Good-bye for the present, then. Chloe, my dear, there is some work for you in the dispensary by and by. You'll find full instructions. Send the boy round before seven o'clock. I say, Laurence, come here a minute, will you?"

And then he departed as rapidly as his long strides could take him out of sight, with Laurence beside him, their voices echoing through the garden for some little time before they died away.

Frances was looking at Chloe with puzzled eyes. "Do you help your father?" she asked, almost shyly of the tall, graceful girl in white. She had heard of English girls who became doctors: but surely Chloe, who looked like a young princess, was not going to follow in their steps? And Chloe, noting her bewilderment, blushed and smiled.

"I am my father's dispenser," she said. Then, seeing that Frances did not seem enlightened, she added an explanation. "I make up his prescriptions: I am qualified, I passed the examination a year ago."

"Yes, Chloe is awfully clever at dispensing," said Milly, with sisterly pride. "Father always wanted one of us to learn it: he said it would be a provision for us if we were left without any money, and as Chloe was good at Latin and science she made up her mind to learn."

"It is a thing that ladies are beginning to do," said Mrs. Fleming, gently adding more explanation, as she saw that Frances was astonished. "They can get very good situations when they are fully qualified: and if Chloe should



ever be in need, she has her profession at her finger-ends, so to speak."

"Father thinks every girl should have a profession," said Milly.

"Oh, I have often thought so," cried Frances, eagerly, "but I could never get anyone to agree with me except American girls; and there were very few American girls whom I really liked, you know. And German girls know nothing but housekeeping, and French girls are rather frivolous, I think, and Italian girls—well, they know nothing at all! I should like to earn my own living, but Cousin Laurence does not like the idea."

"He is like Mr. Derrick," said Milly, looking at Andrew. "Mr. Derrick can't bear it."

Again Chloe colored, and this time Frances wondered why.

"Don't you like women to work?" she asked him, with the directness of a child.

"No, I don't," he answered, bluntly, but he looked at Chloe and not at Frances as he spoke. "I think a woman should be worked for by the men who belong to her and care for her: like the lilies of the field she should neither toil nor spin."

"Yours is a young man's ideal, Andrew," said Mrs. Fleming kindly.

"I don't agree with you," said Milly, loftily. "Every woman should be independent."

But Milly's round face and curly hair made this declaration so ineffective, that Frances laughed and asked her what she desired to be.

"Oh, I'm going to be a doctor," said the sprite, tossing back her hair. "I don't care for half measures—nursing and dispensing and all that sort of thing. I don't want to be a ministering angel: I want—I think I want," said Miss Milly, with a thoughtful air, "to cut off people's arms and legs, and—dissect."

"My dear Milly, you do not know what you are talking

about," said Mrs. Fleming gravely, and Milly subsided at once, rather to Frances's surprise, for she had seldom seen so vivacious a young woman completely dominated by her mother. American girls were so independent of their mothers, as a rule!

Meanwhile Laurence had walked round to the stables with Dr. Fleming, who, after talking on trivial subjects for a few moments, made a sudden pause, and said with some intensity of meaning:

"So that's your ward? A handsome girl, but you must take care of her."

"What do you mean? She's strong enough."

"Oh, yes, muscularly. She seems very well. But I think she has nerves."

"I wish you would say what you mean."

"I don't know that I can," said the doctor. "Either she is naturally of the neurotic temperament—"

"Which she is not," said Laurence, sharply.

"Or she has had some shock to-day; possibly this very afternoon. Horse stumble, or anything of that kind?"

"Nothing at all of that kind."

"Something, then. Perhaps something you know nothing about: I could tell it from her eyes, and her hands—they were very unsteady. If she has had no sudden shock to-day, her nerves must be in a queer state, and you had better let me give her a tonic."

"She wants a tonic no more than you or I do," said Laurence, a little nettled. "I admit that she was startled to-day by something unexpected, and she may not have got over it, but—"

"That's all right, then," said the doctor, cheerily. "That would account for the eyes and hands. She isn't a young woman to be trifled with, I can tell you that, Laurence. She is not quite an ordinary girl."

He mounted to his seat in the dog-cart and drove away, leaving Laurence Corbet more than half offended by his manner. Why should a country doctor—Tom Fleming, a

mere general practitioner, see more in five minutes and tell him more about Frances than he had ever learnt in his life before? Frances, a neurotic subject! Frances, a girl with nerves? Frances, whom he had brought up on his own system, only regretting that it had seemed to make her too cold and self-controlled? He was outraged in his tenderest susceptibilities by the suggestion.

He strolled back to the garden, and found the position of things changed. The tea-table had been carried away, and Milly was looking for tennis balls in the garden borders. Andrew Derrick and Chloe were conversing over the tennis net, in low tones: Frances had drawn her chair close to Mrs. Fleming's, and was talking eagerly. After a moment's hesitation, Laurence devoted himself to Milly. He was jealous of the Flemings already.

Frances was saying that she did not know what profession to follow even if "Cousin Laurence" allowed her to choose one. And Mrs. Fleming replied that she had better do what Laurence wished. As he was her guardian, he was her best adviser.

"Oh, I know that," said Frances. "But I dare say he will do as Mrs. Lester says he will—marry and settle down, and then, you know, I should only be in the way."

Mrs. Fleming looked at her keenly. She knew what people were saying—that Laurence Corbet had been educating a wife for himself, and meant to marry her when she was twenty-one. But there was not a trace of self-consciousness in Frances's tone.

"Laurence does not seem likely to marry at present," Mrs. Fleming said quietly, "so I would not distress myself, dear, by thinking of things that are not likely to happen."

"Oh, I don't distress myself," said Frances in surprise. "I only wonder sometimes what I should do. For, of course, I should be in the way."

"You must come to us if you find yourself in the way," said the doctor's wife, who could not help speaking af-

fectionately. And she was touched to see that Frances's clear eyes were instantly dimmed with tears.

"Do you mean it? Might I really come to you if I were lonely or in trouble?"

"Most certainly, my dear child. We would do all in our power to help you. But I don't think you ought to doubt Laurence's affection and care for you."

"I don't—indeed I am not ungrateful. But one cannot always prevent oneself from thinking that changes might come; and I feel so unprepared for change."

"I should have thought you had had so much of it?"

"Change of place, yes, but not of people who cared for me. I have had very few of those—only Cousin Laurence, in fact. You see—I was all alone!"

And then she stopped, oppressed by thoughts that were too painful for her to share! But she cried a little, surreptitiously, and was rather ashamed of her tears, and Mrs. Fleming had tact enough to pretend that she did not see them, so that Frances presently recovered voice enough to say:

"You must not think I am sentimental and silly. I think it is the seeing you all as a family, so happy, so fond of each other, that made me feel lonely. But nobody could be kinder than Cousin Laurence, and I should be a wretch if I were not happy in his beautiful home."

"But there is some unhappiness somewhere," said Mrs. Fleming to herself, looking at the girl's pale face in which a certain pathetic expression had made itself evident. "I wonder what it is. I wonder whether Laurence is quite the right man to be her guardian? Can it be that he means to marry her, and that she does not care for him? This pining for independence, this attempt of hers to seem contented and happy, does not look as if everything were going on rightly."

But she had no conception of the root of Frances's unhappiness. The sight of her father had roused in the girl's heart a keen sense of shame for him, a shrinking from

him of which she had never before been conscious, and at the same time a yearning desire to approach him in some way—to upbraid him for his short-comings and to be conquered, perhaps, by his humility and his love! Was it not possible? For he was a good man, surely: everybody said that he was good—except Laurence; and he took a prejudiced view. There must be some explanation for that act of cowardice, which Mr. Corbet scorned so deeply: it was more than probable that the father, who had certainly loved her when she was a little girl, had been unconscious, through illness, through a sudden madness, of what he did, when he took that leap into the boat, and deprived her, as it seemed at the moment, of her last chance of life! She was his daughter, after all: she could not but think there must be an explanation, a motive, to palliate what was regarded by Laurence Corbet as a crime.

She felt soothed and calmed by Mrs. Fleming's presence, but the sight of a happy family life called into being all the vague yearnings for a father's or a mother's love which had secretly tormented her for years. She began to form dim plans for helping her father, for heaping coals of fire upon his head—the romantic visions of a young girl who hardly knows the meaning of life and character. Laurence would have been furious with himself for bringing her to Rushton, if he had known! Indeed he would have given the place a very wide berth if he had suspected the presence of Silas Wedderburn in that little country town.

While Frances sat metaphorically at Mrs. Fleming's feet, and Laurence amused himself with Milly, the others—Andrew Derrick and Chloe—spoke together in low tones as if they did not wish to be overheard.

"You did not like what I said about women workers," he murmured. "Forgive me—I did not mean to vex you."

"I have nothing to forgive," said Chloe, speaking with delicate coldness. She was looking down and the sun-

light turned her hair into an aureole of gold. Andrew thought it became her—as a halo becomes a saint.

“I do not want to lose your friendship,” he said, stammering a little with the effort of saying so much and the desire of saying more. “We have been friends since we were children—Chloe.”

He did not often use the name, although she always called him “Andrew,” as she had done when they were playmates in bygone days. He was afraid of doing anything that might bring that friendship to a premature end. But he ventured a little—now.

“I hope we shall always be friends,” she said, very sweetly. In her white dress, with a bunch of sweet-peas at her waist-band, she looked very fair, and a mad desire came upon the young man to throw himself at her feet, and cry aloud, “Do you love me, Chloe? Oh, love me, love me, or I shall hate my life! Love me, or I shall die!” But he refrained himself. Making love to Chloe was a subtle art: no frantic declaration would surprise her into tenderness.

He dared say no more. And he never guessed that his eyes and voice had said for him all that he wanted her to know.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## MISS KETTLEWELL'S OPINION.

"So this is your ward?" said Miss Kettlewell, eyeing Frances curiously, when the ceremony of introduction was over. Laurence and Frances had not found time to visit King's Leigh on the afternoon of their call upon the Flemings, so they had driven over in state next day. Laurence was not altogether sorry for the change of plan, for he felt that Aunt Keturah would prefer to see Frances in "a proper dress," as she called it, rather than in a riding-habit, and he had given his ward a hint to make herself rather fine for the occasion.

Frances considered that she knew how to dress. Perhaps she had learnt the art from the many French and American women whom she had seen abroad: certainly she knew how to put on her clothes, which few English girls know how to do. For her first visit to Laurence's aunt, she donned a fawn-colored dress embroidered in brown, the insertions of embroidery being lined with pale rose-colored silk, which re-appeared in the linings of the loose feather-trimmed cloak and in the revers and frills of the bodice and skirt. It was a very dainty costume and suited her admirably; she read a sort of appreciation of it in Miss Kettlewell's eye even while Miss Kettlewell's lips breathed nothing but criticism.

"Where did you get that frock, child? Paris? I thought so. I remember something like it myself when I was a girl. You must be very extravagant to get your frocks in Paris. Who pays for them, I should like to know? Have you a fortune of your own?"

Laurence was furious, but Frances answered with perfect good humor:

"No, Miss Kettlewell, I haven't a penny of my own. My

guardian pays for my pretty frocks." And she darted a look of smiling gratitude towards Laurence.

"Your guardian! And who made him your guardian?" said the terrible old lady. "You, yourself, I suppose."

Frances was equal to the occasion. "His own goodness of heart, I think," she said, prettily.

"Do you hear that, Laurence? You have trained her to say the right thing, at any rate," cried Miss Kettlewell. "See here—what do you call yourself? Frances—"

"Frances Corbet," said Laurence, quickly.

"Let the girl speak for herself, Laurence," said Aunt Keturah, with a wicked gleam of her dark bright eyes. "Frances—what?"

"My name is Frances, but not Frances Corbet," replied the girl with a quiet clearness, which put her questioner to rout, "my real surname I am not at liberty to give you, as my guardian does not wish it to be used."

"Hoity, toity!" said the old lady, staring at her. "Here we have a young lady who knows her own mind! Frances—Frances Corbet: well, you may call me Aunt, as Laurence does; Aunt Keturah. I thought I should mind, but I don't."

Miss Kettlewell liked to electrify her hearers. Even Laurence started and seemed surprised: Miss Wedderburn, who was seated in the room with her knitting, let it fall on her knees, and looked steadily at Frances as if she had thought her unworthy of her notice before. Everyone wondered, in the momentary pause that followed, what Frances was going to do.

"She always does the best thing in the world, the little witch," said Laurence to himself as he watched her. The girl went up to the old lady, took the wrinkled hand in hers and kissed it. "You could have said nothing that could give me greater pleasure, dear Aunt—dear Aunt Keturah," she said, with just the little hesitation and modulation of her voice that showed a graceful timidity



and reluctance to encroach: "my guardian has always told me how good you were to him."

"Heaven and earth, Laurence, where did you pick her up?" said Aunt Keturah, staring after the girl as she went out of the room with Miss Wedderburn, who had been bidden to show her the terrace, which was one of the glories of King's Leigh. "I thought you told me she was a waif and stray."

"Not exactly. I'm sure I never said that. She comes of quite respectable people."

"Quite respectable people!" mimicked Miss Kettlewell, "I should think she did. Why, Laurence, the girl's a Heron of Hernesdale."

"My dear Aunt Keturah! I know Frances's parentage perfectly well. Her father and mother were of no more importance than—your Miss Wedderburn. I never pretended that she was a girl of family."

Miss Kettlewell nodded two or three times, and tightened her lips. "You never knew the Herons as I did, Laurence. I was at Hernesdale a good deal in my youth." She paused for a moment, and it flashed across her nephew's mind that he had heard of some romance in Keturah Kettlewell's early life—a romance connected with a Heron of Hernesdale, dead and gone many a long year ago. It was from the ending of this romance that Miss Kettlewell had given up society, and immured herself in a mere corner of her fine old house, where for nearly fifty years she had lived the life of a recluse. He was sorry for her, but he did not dare to advert to what he knew. After a time, she resumed her speech. "Your Frances, whoever she is, is the very image of Emmeline Heron before she went abroad. And Frances is one of the Hernesdale family names. In every generation there is a Frances or two. Your Frances is a relation: take my word for it."

"It is a perfect impossibility," said Laurence.

"Nothing is an impossibility in this world. I wonder what became of Emmeline Heron," said the old lady re-

flectively. "She went out to Australia with her brother, when he was made Governor or something. She married out there. You picked up this child on the way home from Australia, didn't you? Are you quite sure she is not Emmeline Heron's grand-daughter?"

"The most unlikely thing in the world, my dear aunt."

"Well, she's got all the Heron characteristics," said Miss Kettlewell. "I like the girl. She walks like a queen. All the Herons have that walk, you know. I didn't expect a girl of that sort: I thought she would be a round-faced, pert, plebeian little thing, whose rosy cheeks had attracted you. I wish you would tell me her name."

Laurence laughed and shook his head.

"If you won't," said Miss Kettlewell, with some irritability, "then I would advise you to give her your own in good earnest."

"Eh?" said Laurence, who was surprised.

"I mean what I say. You need not lose your manners, Laurence, although you have been abroad so many years. Marry the girl, and the county will accept her. Keep her hanging on in this anomalous position, and you will find that everyone will look askance at her."

"Hang the county!" cried Laurence.

"By all means. I never thought much of provincial society myself," said Miss Kettlewell imperturbably. "But I had an idea that you meant to take a position in the county: that was all I meant and you would not be thought the worse of for marrying this girl, especially if you would tell us all who she was; everyone has been saying for the last five years that you were bringing her up to be your wife."

"As if Frances were to have no voice in the matter."

"Well, of course she hasn't; she ought not to have. She owes everything to you. There ought to be no possibility of her saying you nay. I daresay she quite understands her position, and is perfectly ready to marry you as soon as you throw the handkerchief."

"You were always unpractical," said Miss Keturah, severely. "Surely you must see that unless you marry her, you are doing the girl a great injury. You are not old enough to play the part of heavy father, Laurence: and you had better do at once what she no doubt expects you to do."

"If I had ever thought of such a thing—" and then he paused, "your remarks would make it quite impossible."

"What for?"

"I could not ask a woman to marry me if she or I entertained the thoughts you attribute to us. Besides I am sure that Frances does not think of me except as a guardian, almost an old man, immeasurably removed from her; and—in fact—she was proposing the other day that she should go away altogether and earn her own living."

"Spirited girl! I thought so," said Miss Kettlewell, approvingly. "She sees what is expected of her and wants to get out of it."

"No such thing!" said Laurence, angrily.

"Probably," his tormentor went on, "she has a lover of her own age on the sly—"

"You need not insult her, Aunt Keturah. Frances never does anything underhand."

"Girls don't know what you mean by honor in love-affairs, my dear. Some handsome young Italian, I dare say; some vivacious young Frenchman, with whom she corresponds when your back is turned—"

"If I thought so," said Laurence, bringing his hand down sharply on the table, "she might go and be a governess to-morrow!"

Miss Kettlewell looked at him and smiled inscrutably. Her fine ivory-like features were stirred by a play of something like amusement at this speech. The exquisite lace on her white head vibrated as if with momentary laughter as she replied:

"Ah, it is as I thought. You are in love with her already."

"I am nothing of the kind," said Laurence, furiously. And then he checked himself, for Frances and Miss Wedderburn were at the door, and he rose, saying in rather constrained tones, that it was time to go.

"Come and see me again, soon, child," said Miss Kettlewell, turning her wrinkled cheek to Frances to be kissed. "You remind me of some friends of mine, in my youth. Laurence, you had better ascertain all about Lady Emmeline's marriage. If your Frances turns out one of the Herons, I'll take care to remember her in my will, and the Flemings may go a-begging for all I care."

As it happened Frances's eyes rested on Miss Wedderburn's face while Miss Kettlewell was speaking, and she was struck by a curious and indefinable change that took place in it at that moment. It was always pale, but she turned to a sickly greenish hue which made Frances think that the companion was about to faint. She made a step forward, and uttered a slight exclamation of alarm, which, however, passed unnoticed by Miss Kettlewell and Laurence, who were exchanging a few not very amicable last words; and Miss Wedderburn, instantly recovering herself, frowned, angrily, and made a sign of such evident repulsion that Frances retreated behind her guardian and took no further notice of the change in her appearance. But she had material for questions with which to harass Laurence a little, while they were driving home.

"Cousin Laurence—"

"Drop the cousin, Frances. Let me hear my name without a title, will you? I should like it better."

"Oh, of course, if you like it better—Laurence, then, did you notice how white Miss Wedderburn turned when your aunt talked about her will?"

"No, I didn't see. But I daresay Miss Wedderburn hopes that something may come her way when my aunt dies."

"Oh, I hope so," said Frances pityingly. "She must

have had a hard life of it. I do not think I should care to live ten years with Miss Kettlewell."

"No doubt she has suffered a good deal," said Laurence, somewhat grimly. Then came the question he had dreaded.

"What did your aunt mean about—the Herons? And who are the Herons, Laurence?"

"The Herons are very grand people in this part of the world, my dear. The Earl of Hernesdale is really a great personage, and his son, Viscount Heron, is the popular young man of the neighborhood. My aunt knew them all very well when she was young, and she has a fancy that you resemble them—that is all. An old woman's fancy, of no importance; for of course you can have no possible connection with the Hernesdales."

"Of course not."

"My aunt was a beauty in her time, and engaged, I believe to the Lord Heron of her day. He was drowned one foggy night in crossing the fens, and she never went into the world again. It has been a lonely life for her. We must humor her whims a little, when we can."

"She was very kind to me," said Frances, dreamily, and then she sat still and asked no more questions, for which Laurence was thankful.

Miss Kettlewell sat for some time in her chair, quietly musing, when her visitors had gone. Her favorite Jim had gone out for a walk; and presently his mistress began to feel lonely, for her companion had also disappeared. She rang the bell rather impatiently, but when Miss Wedderburn was summoned, the old lady was astonished and annoyed. For Miss Wedderburn was dressed in outdoor garments and remarked coldly that she wanted a little fresh air and was going out.

"And where are you going, I should like to know," said Miss Kettlewell, snappishly.

"I am going into the town."

"To see your cousin, I suppose. Take care, Lavinia,

you will be town's talk before you know where you are, and you won't like that, I'm certain. The man doesn't mean to ask you to marry him, or he would have done so before this; and it's no use running after him."

"I suppose," said Miss Wedderburn, in an injured voice, "that I may be allowed to exchange a few words occasionally with the only relation that remains to me in the world?"

"Oh, I've no objection. I only caution you for your own good not to make a fool of yourself."

Lavinia Wedderburn's cold eyes flashed. But she controlled herself and answered placidly. "I am not in the habit of doing so, Miss Kettlewell. I know my cousin very well, and I only approach him when I have important affairs to discuss with him. I have important affairs to discuss to-night."

"Let me know when the day's fixed, and I'll give you a wedding present," said Miss Kettlewell, disagreeably. "And open the window for Jim, will you? Don't you hear him sneezing? What time shall you be back? I object to dining alone, as you know."

"I will try to be back in time for dinner," said Miss Wedderburn, resignedly. "Even although we may be in the midst of an interesting conversation of a most important nature, I will try to break it off at the proper time—"

"Oh, stay the evening, by all means," said Miss Kettlewell, in a snappish tone. "I don't want you to make a martyr of yourself, Lavinia. Jim is just as good a companion as you are, when you have not had your own way. I don't want to interfere with your conversation with the Reverend Silas."

"Thank you, Miss Kettlewell," said Lavinia meekly. But the meekness was all external; she was raging inwardly.

"I think she wants to propose to him," said the old lady to herself, when Miss Wedderburn was safely out of hear-

ing. "Perhaps she means to do it to-night. I shouldn't be sorry if she did—if he accepted her. Miss Wedderburn has been here a trifle too long. The Fleming girls would be more cheerful companions, or that girl Frances—as handsome a creature as I ever saw, and as like Emmeline Heron as two peas. There must be some connection if only Laurence would take the trouble to hunt it out."

"Hateful old woman," the companion was meanwhile saying to herself, as she hurried along the Rushton road. "She has no love for a single person in this world, I believe; no pity, no sympathy, not the slightest delicacy of feeling. I could put up with her jeers and jibes, if I thought she meant to provide for me after her death, but I know she does not mean to leave me a single penny. She has no heart. And unless I marry Silas, I shall have to go out into the world again and seek another situation—I can't do it, I can't do it. I am too old. I must marry Silas. I would rather die than bear the poverty, the privation that I suffered before I found a home with Miss Kettlewell: a thousand, thousand times I would prefer to die."

And Lavinia Wedderburn's cold blue eyes traveled sullenly to the rows of pollard willows which marked the course of a little sluggish stream between Rushton and King's Leigh.

## CHAPTER IX.

## THE MINISTER'S STUDY.

Mr. Wedderburn's study was an exceptionally comfortable room. It was not large—the house itself was not large, though a good one in its way, and it was furnished in a good old-fashioned style, with mahogany and crimson curtains, but the glowing tints of the curtains and cushions did well with the dark wood, and the minister's books lined a goodly phalanx behind the glass doors of the bookcases. The big writing-table was well provided with cut-glass inkstands, quill pens, blotting pads, stacks of papers; but it was a little too neat to look like the study of a man who worked very much. Traces of Mr. Wedderburn's occupations were more usually found on a small table near the window beside which, on summer evenings, a big chair was pulled up, and where a half-smoked cigar, a flower in a glass vase, a book laid face down, would show that the minister had found pleasant means of passing away a vacant half-hour.

The furniture of the room had been presented to him by the congregation, and especially Matthew Derrick, the minister, the father of that Andrew Derrick who was so anxious in his attentions to Chloe Fleming. The people of Lane Chapel had done more for Mr. Wedderburn in that way than for any other minister. Silas Wedderburn's reputation as a preacher was so great, and it was thought a wonderful thing to secure him for Rushton, that the people had been ready to offer him anything within their power. They considered it a lucky chance that he had worked himself in a great manufacturing town; and that he had led a quiet country life, and Matthew Derrick had himself pleaded with the popular preacher to come to



Rushton and recruit his strength. "There's naught to do in particular," the miller had said, "and Rushton's a fine little place, though a small one. We'll give you a nice house and a good stipend and we'll begin building operations for a new chapel, if you'll come to us, Mr. Wedderburn." So Mr. Wedderburn came, and had hitherto not regretted it; although he considered it a drawback that the scene of his ministrations lay so near the place at which his cousin Lavinia lived. His cousin Lavinia worried him a good deal sometimes.

He laid down his book with a sigh when the servant-girl announced her on the evening after Frances's call upon Miss Kettlewell. He was sure that she had come in one way or another, to disturb his peace. And he looked like a man who loved peace, who loved his ease. The dark hair was thin over his forehead and showed the fine brow distinctly: it was the lower part of the face that had changed, that had grown almost sensual and almost coarse. His waistcoat was unbuttoned: his feet were encased in large wool-work slippers: his tie had slipped round and was under one ear, and his coat was decidedly old and shiny. The book that he had laid aside was a yellow-backed novel, and a glass of wine flanked the vase of roses that stood at his left hand. Lavinia suspected him of using the flower vase for a screen to his glass, should an intemperate teetotaler of his congregation chance to call. He looked altogether at his ease, and it was quite apparent that in order to feel entirely at his ease he must be somewhat slovenly in his dress and self-indulgent in his habits. He moved a little in his great arm-chair as Miss Wedderburn came in, but did not rise: he offered her his hand, which was white and soft and flabby, in spite of its originally fine shape and tapering finger-tips.

"You look comfortable," said Miss Wedderburn, regarding him with disfavor.

"And you, my dear Lavinia, look hot and tired. Per-

mit me to offer you a chair and—will you take a glass of wine and a biscuit?"

"Thank you, no. I doubt whether your income is sufficient for these expensive luxuries, Silas."

"Do you not think I am the best judge, Lavinia, of what is right and fitting for me to buy?"

They always sparred in this way when they met, but on this occasion Lavinia was the first to control herself.

"Perhaps so, Silas," she said in a conciliatory tone. "I am sure I didn't mean to say anything to offend you. I came to consult you about one or two things, that was all. You know how I value your excellent advice."

Mr. Wedderburn's dark eyes, that had at first rested on her with furtive suspicion, opened a little wider, and a more complacent expression crossed his face. He pulled down his waistcoat and drank off the rest of his wine. "Well, Lavinia," he said, "well, well! What can I do for you this evening? You are sure you will not take a glass of port? No? Well, it is rather heating, but the doctor orders it for me, because my circulation is so defective—and what is it you want, Lavinia? My advice?"

His voice was rich and mellow, but somewhat unctuous; there was a slight huskiness in it now and then, which only disappeared completely when he was very much excited, as in speaking or preaching in public. Lavinia admired his voice exceedingly: and so did his congregation.

"It is partly concerning matters at King's Leigh that I wish to consult you," she said dryly. She sat facing him, in a stiff attitude: she had chosen the hardest and most uncomfortable chair that could be found in the minister's study. He lay back on his crimson cushions, unbuttoned and at ease: she sat upright before him, neat, well-dressed, in sober colors: her neatly waved black hair plastered down on either side of a shining forehead, her nose unduly prominent, her lips reduced to one straight line. She presented a "ladylike" but not an attractive appearance: and Silas Wedderburn's thoughts, which were apt to rove, flew from

her to the face and figure of a young girl whom he had seen on horseback the day before, just outside the churchyard. But why the one should suggest the other, he could not say.

"I hope our venerable friend is well," he said, with lumbering courtesy that roused Miss Wedderburn's ire.

"Well! she is well enough: she is never anything but well, in spite of her age, but why you should call her venerable, I am sure I do not know. Anyone who has less claim to be venerated, I have never met. She is cold, callous, cruel: she—"

"Ah, Lavinia! Lavinia! be merciful," said Mr. Wedderburn. "Remember, dear Lavinia, that she is rich. To be rich is to be venerable, my friend. The gifts of Providence should always receive respect."

"The gifts—perhaps," said Lavinia, "but not the persons on whom the gifts are lavished, and by whom they are wasted. Listen, Silas: the wretched old woman whom you call venerable is contemplating a new will. She made one some time ago—you know I told you," and her voice quivered a little, "in which she left me an annuity and everything else to charities. It was for that reason that I begged you to wait when you asked me—" she cast down her eyes modestly—"to be your wife. I thought that if I left her, she might alter the disposition of her will, and leave me nothing, and I could not bear to come to you penniless, Silas, dear."

She put her handkerchief to her eyes and discreetly wiped away a tear, while Silas winced and looked away. True he had asked her to marry him, but the engagement was a secret, and he hoped to end it before it became publicly known.

"Well, what has happened?" he asked.

"She has been talking so much of the Flemings," Miss Wedderburn complained. "She seems to be quite getting over her dislike of them, although I assure you I have fostered it as much as possible. I have represented to her

how intensely horrible it will be to think of Chloe with her pestle and mortar, making pills perhaps in the drawing-room, and that foolish little Milly with her fast ways dancing all over the place. But all I said seemed to have no effect, and I was beginning to despair, when all at once a change has come over the scene, and she is suddenly enamored of quite another person."

"Yes, who is it?" said Mr. Wedderburn.

"Why, that girl who is a ward—as he says—of Mr. Corbet's. Corbet of Denstone: you know him, surely; there is some talk of his standing for the county, on the Conservative side, of course."

"I know the name."

"He has come home to settle, it appears; and he brings with him this girl, his ward, he calls her—his daughter more likely, in my opinion: and Miss Kettlewell has taken the most violent fancy to this girl Frances—Frances Corbet, as they call her—and says that she must be related to the Herons of Hernesdale, whoever they may be—"

Mr. Wedderburn shrugged his shoulders. "The fancy will pass, my good Lavinia, as other fancies have passed. You need not excite yourself about them."

"She spoke to-day of remembering her in her will. And if she makes a new one, Silas—oh, I sometimes think that she is not in her right mind!"

"Do not say so, Lavinia. It is not your place. Leave it to other people to say things of that kind. They will only bring discredit upon yourself."

"I shall not say anything indiscreet: you may be sure of that," said Miss Wedderburn, somewhat sullenly. "But I have another idea. Silas, have you seen Mr. Corbet?"

"Not to my knowledge," said Silas, readily enough.

He spoke the truth. He had never heard Laurence Corbet's name when he was on the Attaman: or if he had heard, he had forgotten it. And his face had faded from his memory: there was no reason why he should remember Mr. Corbet's face better than that of a dozen others of his

fellow passengers. When he had met Mr. Corbet in the street, he had not recognized him in the least, although he had thought vaguely: "This is a face that I fancy I have seen before."

"Do you not know," said Lavinia, "that he was one of the passengers on board the ship that took fire and went down in the Pacific? Oh, Silas, were you not on that boat, too?"

"Lavinia," said Mr. Wedderburn, shading his eyes with his hand, "the remembrances which you call up are far too painful for me to bear, I would rather that you did not recall them to my mind. My nerves have never been what they were before that dreadful scene. The vision of that beloved child whom I failed to rescue, esteeming, as I did, my work of the first importance—that painful necessity of self-preservation—"

"My idea is," said Lavinia, interrupting him ruthlessly, "that the girl whom Mr. Corbet has brought home with him is your daughter."

"What?" said Silas, suddenly lowering his hand. His face turned pale. He straightened himself in his chair and looked hard at his cousin. "Tell me what you mean," he said.

"She is called Frances," said Miss Wedderburn, slowly. "She is nineteen—the age corresponds, does it not? She acknowledges that Corbet is not her own name, and refuses to tell what her own is. She is the adopted child of Laurence Corbet, who was on the burning ship with you. Now does not that look as if she were your little Fanny, whom you left behind when you escaped?"

Silas Wedderburn made a deprecating gesture with his white hand.

"You put the matter a trifle coarsely, my dear Lavinia," he said. "Heaven knows what pain it caused me—the choice that I had to make was hard indeed: but for the sake of the Cause that I represented I sacrificed my natural feelings and preserved my life. I grieve to say that an

unkind view of the situation was afterwards presented to the committee which I served; resulting in the choice of another man to go back to the Islands and conduct the enterprise of colonization. It has since failed. But I have prospered," said Mr. Wedderburn, with suave elation, "and the tongues of evil men have not prevailed against me. Nevertheless, I deprecate any allusion to that troublesome time; and I must confess, my dear Lavinia—" here his voice grew hurried and a little breathless—"that I do not wish the story to be revived in Rushton, and especially within hearing of Mr. Derrick, my kind friend, Mr. Derrick."

"You needn't make such long speeches to me, Silas," said his cousin, impatiently. "What I want to know is, do you remember whether there was any other child on board called Frances, about the age of your Fanny? Had Mr. Corbet any friends with him?"

"I have no information to give you. I did not burden my memory with any such particulars," said Mr. Wedderburn. "There may have been a dozen children of that name on board for all I know. You will remember that I embarked from one of the islands, and had been on board a very short time when the fire took place."

"You can tell me nothing, then?"

"Nothing."

"You are sure that your little girl—"

"Spare me, Lavinia. I cannot talk of her."

"Well, I suppose I was mistaken," said Miss Wedderburn. "I did think for one moment that she was your daughter, and that if so—what a splendid chance for us!"

Silas uncovered his shaded eyes again. "What do you mean, Lavinia?"

"Don't you see?" said Lavinia, with energy. "Suppose your daughter inherited all Miss Kettlewell's riches? Suppose your daughter were Mr. Corbet's adopted child? Would she not provide for her relatives? for her father?"

for her cousin? We should live in clover, Silas, for the rest of our life."

Silas moved uneasily. Perhaps he had an inner conviction that his daughter, if she still lived, might remember certain details that were not entirely to his credit; at any rate, the suggestion made him unhappy. He cloaked his real anxiety by a melancholy sigh.

"We are not so fortunate, Lavinia. We shall never see my sweet little child again."

"Should you know her, if you saw her, do you think?" queried Lavinia, somewhat brutally.

Mr. Wedderburn experienced the sensation of an electric shock. He suddenly remembered the face of the girl whom he had seen on horseback near the church. It had startled him then; it recurred to him now with overwhelming significance. He had known the face!

"It is quite impossible, Lavinia," he said, with sudden decision. "My daughter was lost on board the Attaman. If she had been rescued, should I not have heard of her? I am not so obscure, so unknown," he added, with a slight flourish of his hand, "that I could not be heard of if my child had wished to find me. I have nothing to do with the Corbets, or they with me. My good Lavinia, you have found a mare's nest."

"Oh, very well," said Lavinia, ill-temperedly. "If that is the way you take my efforts to assist you, I will do no more. I thought I had found a way of helping you out of your difficulties."

"My difficulties, Lavinia?"

"Of course, I know, Silas, that you are deeply in debt."

"Good heaven! Think what you are saying, Lavinia. If it were known in Rushton that I was in debt, my influence would be gone. Old Derrick has a horror of debt: he has told me so. If he took away his support—"

Silas was positively trembling. Lavinia put out her hand and laid it on his shoulder. "Trust me," she said,

half tenderly, half compassionately, "and I will tell nobody. You are in debt?"

It had been simply a guess on her part.

"Yes—deeply."

"And the girl? You don't think she is your daughter?"

"I—I—God knows!" said Silas Wedderburn.

And the woman at his side despised him, although she loved him with all her heart.



## CHAPTER X.

## MISS KETTLEWELL'S PROJECTS.

The summer merged into autumn, without bringing much change into the lives of those with whom we are concerned. Frances made many acquaintances, and advanced further in friendship with the Flemings; she visited Miss Kettlewell also from time to time, and was stealthily watched by Miss Wedderburn. Silas Wedderburn found it necessary to spend a few weeks at the sea-side—Matthew Derrick paying his expenses—and Frances did not therefore come across him in the streets of Rushton, and, indeed, almost flattered herself that he had left the town. But Milly undeceived her. Milly knew all about the affairs of the Chapel in Zion Lane, although her own family were staunch Churchgoers. Andrew kept her well informed upon the subject, which he often heard discussed in his father's house.

"Mr. Wedderburn is so delicate, you know," Milly said, "that the congregation thought it better for him to go away for a little while. It seems very funny to have to do just what your congregation tells you, doesn't it? I am sure Mr. Greene, our Vicar, would not like it at all."

"Why! is Mr. Wedderburn delicate? He seems a big strong man," said Frances, half against her will.

"Nerves, my dear, nerves, and over-work and overstrain and all that sort of thing. They say he has had great sorrows," said Milly, her gay childish face overcast for a moment. "There was some sort of tragedy in his earlier years—"

"Tragedy!" exclaimed Frances. She could not keep the mocking note out of her expressive voice.

"Why not?" said Milly, facing round upon her. "Do

you know anything about him, Frank? Wasn't it a tragedy after all?"

"I know nothing about a tragedy. I have heard of Mr. Wedderburn of course," said Frances, trying to speak quietly. "Tragedy is a big word, Milly, that is all. When he comes back, I have sometimes thought I should like to go and hear him preach."

"Well, so should I, but mother does not care about my going. But you could go; you have nobody to prevent you—at least I should not think that Laurence would mind."

Frances was silent; she was not sure. She had noticed that Laurence had lately shown a curious irritation whenever she adverted to the position or character of her father. It was as if he were afraid that Silas Wedderburn might in some way acquire an influence over Frances—an influence which Laurence would have disliked and deplored. And therefore Frances was growing silent on the subject, but thought of it all the more intently through the golden months of autumn where she was being introduced to a kind of life which she had never known before. Shooting parties, luncheons, picnics, garden-parties, came in quick succession for there were a good many large and hospitable houses in the neighborhood of Rushton, and Laurence Corbet had always been popular, so that his "ward" came in for a good share of the pleasant things going. But the great excitement of all would come in October, when the Hernesdale's were to give a really great ball, and where the Flemings as well as Frances would be present.

Frances was perhaps less excited and impressed than she was expected to be. She had seen a good deal of foreign society, and had been to a big ball or two in Rome and Florence and other parts of the world; so that she felt immeasurably older and more experienced than Milly Fleming, for instance, who was to "come out" at Lady Hernesdale's, and had never been to any balls at all. Chloe said that she cared very little whether she went or went not; but

even Frances noticed that she looked bright at the prospect when she was assured that some of her friends would be present, and when Andrew Derrick asked her if she would not keep a dance for him. But Milly's excitement as the day drew near was so great that she could not keep it out of her conversation when she went to see Miss Kettlewell, although her mother had given her a gentle hint that she had better not talk too much to Aunt Keturah about her gaieties.

Aunt Keturah had quite a tea party one afternoon. It was so fine and warm that tea was served upon the terrace, and Miss Kettlewell herself, muffled in soft white shawls until she looked almost like a mummy, except for her bright dark eyes, presided at the tea-table. Frances was there, and the two Fleming girls. Miss Kettlewell seemed to like to see them together, although, as Milly said, it was chiefly because of the pleasure it gave her to tell them how very superior Frances was to them both, and how very much she resembled Keturah's friend, Lady Emmeline Heron.

"Perhaps you will see her portrait if you go to this dance at the Hernesdales," she said, nodding sagaciously. "It used to hang in the library. Lord Heron would show it to you, Frances, if you asked him. He comes to see me sometimes; he is a nice boy."

"Oh, isn't he!" said Milly, unexpectedly. Then she grew pink all over, and was silent.

"And pray, how do you know whether he is nice or not?" said Miss Kettlewell with a frown.

"I know him—a little," said Milly demurely. Then, after a pause, "We used to go birds' nesting together."

"Oh, when you were children! I remember, you met him here sometimes."

"We used to have great fun, didn't we, Chloe?" said Milly. "At least, Charlie and I had—oh, but I forgot I must not call him Charlie any more."

"I should think not," said Chloe, smiling. "I can fancy

Lady Hernesdale looking very much astonished if you did."

"And why should she look astonished?" exclaimed Miss Kettlewell, who had an ungracious way of contradicting Chloe whenever she made a statement. "In what way is Lady Hernesdale superior to us, do you think? She was only a cotton manufacturer's daughter, and of no family at all. You on one side at least,"—with a rather vicious emphasis on the words—"are greatly her superior."

The girls were silent; they very much resented the old lady's veiled attacks upon their mother's family; but they had been trained to treat Aunt Keturah with respect and to remember that she had peculiarities." Many was the battle-royal they had had with her in their childhood; but as they grew older, they were better able to command themselves. For a few minutes, therefore, they let Miss Kettlewell's tongue run on unchecked.

"And you, my dear," said the old lady, turning to Frances, "you have certainly no need to allow yourself to be patronized by Lady Hernesdale, remember that, and stick up for yourself. You belong to the elder branch, you know Emmeline Heron's brother was the Earl, and these present people are the younger branch, which came in when the old Earl died. You are very like your grandmama, my dear, and I am proud to see you in my house after all these years: for it was to your great-uncle that I was betrothed so many, many years ago—"

"What does she mean? What is she saying?" Frances cried, turning to the others with a face as white as death. Chloe and Millicent had sprung to their feet, with startled wondering gaze. Miss Kettlewell was looking before her with a strange smile on her face, and a curious film before her brilliant eyes. Lavinia Wedderburn came to the rescue. "She will be all right in a minute or two," she whispered to Frances. "Her mind goes astray now and then, and she thinks she is speaking to people of a former genera-

tion. It is quite usual with aged persons to have moments of that kind."

It seemed as though Miss Wedderburn were right. The film cleared away from Miss Kettlewell's eyes, which looked as bright and hard and keen as ever. The smile faded from her lips, and was succeeded by an expression of annoyance.

"Why are you all staring at me in this way?" she said, irritably, "I am not ill. I only fell asleep for a minute or two. Haven't we finished tea, yet?"

"Quite, Aunt Keturah, thank you," said Chloe, with great promptness. "Shall I give you my arm into the house? The air seems a little chilly."

"No such thing," said Miss Kettlewell, sharply. "Chilly! What will you say next? Go and show Frances the garden, and Millicent can stay with me. Lavinia, you have not given Jim any cream; I wish you would not be so forgetful."

"There is none left I will fetch it," said Lavinia, casting a rather spiteful glance at the offended Jim, who was sitting in a stately manner before a well filled saucer with an expression which seemed to say that plain, vulgar milk was the last thing he could touch.

"I believe she put it all into her own cup," said Milly confidentially to her kinswoman, when Miss Wedderburn was out of sight. "I saw her empty the jug, Aunt Keturah. She doesn't like Jim one bit, although he's a perfect angel."

Miss Kettlewell looked benignant. Innocent Milly had said the very thing that pleased her. For once she felt inclined to encourage the child to talk.

"You are very much taken up with this ball, I suppose," she remarked grimly. "I am glad Lady Hernesdale asked you, it shows that she remembers the proposed connection between the families. Otherwise a doctor's daughters could hardly have expected such an invitation."

"Father is quite as good as the Hernesdales!" said Milly indignantly. "Even if we are not as rich, and can't dress

as well as some people, we are of a good old family, Aunt Keturah—you have often said so yourself!”

“Yes, yes, and that’s all very well; but riches and dress make a difference.”

“Not to some people! Do you know, Aunt Keturah, I met Charlie—Lord Heron, I mean—in the road the other day; and I had on my oldest frock and gloves with holes in them, but he didn’t seem to see them one bit.”

“Naturally he would not tell you of them,” said Miss Kettlewell, with her croaking laugh.

“Oh, I think he would! He always used to tease me about my frocks and my inky fingers, years ago. I don’t believe he would have minded saying ‘Hallo, Curlywig, why don’t you mend your gloves?’ the least little bit in the world.”

“I hope he said nothing of the sort.”

“Oh, no!” said Milly blushing up to her eyes, and looking suddenly shy. “He only said how glad he was we were coming and hoped I hadn’t forgotten him, although we had not met for so long a time, and all that sort of polite and civil thing, you know. And he made me promise him a waltz—or two.”

“Oh, did he?”—Miss Kettlewell turned and surveyed Milly from head to foot with a look of new interest. “What are you going to wear?” was her next question.

“White, Auntie.”

“White, of course, what material?”

“Oh, it’s a soft white silk, not expensive, you know, but I think it will look rather nice, made up with chiffon or something light and pretty. Chloe has a dress something like it already, not quite new, but she looks nice in anything. Frances is the lucky one!”

“Eh?”

“Oh, she’s got a lovely dress—from Paris, I believe, all lace and silver embroidery over satin, and the most beautiful feather fan and real pearls! She looks splendid in it.

We made her try it on when we were at Denstone yesterday."

Miss Kettlewell made an inarticulate exclamation, which Milly did not quite understand.

"You don't think I mind, do you, Aunt Keturah? On the contrary, I am very, very glad. I like her to look nice. After all, pretty frocks don't make up for a mother and father, do they?" said Milly, with a wise look.

"She is a pretty creature," muttered Aunt Keturah to herself. But she was not applying the words to Frances, as Milly thought. Rather it had occurred to her that Millicent might possibly marry well, if she were properly dressed, and that hitherto the child had never had a decent dress in her life. After all, it was not fair that this unknown Frances should eclipse Miss Kettlewell's young cousins in the eyes of the county. It would be better for her to present her young relatives with garments which should be a credit to the family.

When the girls were gone, she broached the subject, with a sour look, to Miss Wedderburn.

"I can't have those Fleming girls making frights of themselves," she said in her brusque way. "If Laurence's ward can be dressed suitably, why not my cousin's children?"

"I dare say they will be dressed quite suitably to their position," said Miss Wedderburn."

"Hum! An old frock for one, and a two-penny—half-penny flimsy silk for the other. Goodness knows what they will have in the way of gloves and boots. No, I can't have it. I shall dress them myself."

Miss Wedderburn's eyes opened wide at this suggestion. "Dr. and Mrs. Fleming are very independent," she remarked, "I am afraid they will decline your kind offer."

"They won't have the chance. I shall tell them nothing about it until the dresses are made, and you will have to manage the details, Lavinia. Write and ask the girls to dine and sleep here one day this week. When they are in

bed, you can get hold of their frocks, and take the measurements, and we'll send the order to a woman I know in London. I'm not going to have Chloe and Millicent worse dressed than that Frances girl, handsome as she is."

"If you dress them in that way, people will begin to say that you intend to leave them your money," said Miss Wedderburn sullenly.

Miss Kettlewell's bright eyes lighted up with sudden mirth, she laughed grimly and silently, until her hooked nose and prominent chin seemed almost to meet. "And what if I do?" she said, much enjoying the spectacle of Miss Wedderburn's discomfiture. "What if I do? Co-heiresses. Not a bad idea of yours, Lavinia, at all. And if they were to make good marriages, it would be quite worth while. We'll see how the ball turns out before we decide. Write the note, Lavinia, and send to London for patterns of good white satin and brocade. We'll out-do Laurence Corbet yet."

Much against her will, Miss Wedderburn was obliged to perform her employer's behests. It was she who transacted all the business connected with those dresses—business which she detested from her heart. If she could have made the plot miscarry, if she could have spoilt the beauty of the dresses, she would gladly have done so; but she had no chance of treachery, for Miss Kettlewell insisted on superintending every detail of the proceedings, and when the dresses were completed, and safely despatched to Dr. Fleming's house, with fans and gloves and ornaments all complete, Miss Keturah Kettlewell chuckled to herself and was satisfied.



## CHAPTER XI.

## HER LAST APPEARANCE.

Dr. Fleming and his wife found considerable difficulty in making up their minds to accept Miss Kettlewell's present. Although they had always allowed their girls to visit her, they had been resolute against receiving favors, and to Mrs. Fleming at least, there seemed something of an insult in Miss Kettlewell's obvious conviction that she could not dress her daughters properly. But she did not put this feeling into words, and her husband, after a little hesitation, told her that it would be ungracious not to accept a gift concerning which the old lady had evidently taken so much trouble. It was Chloe who was most difficult to convince on the subject. She wanted to send the dress back at once, and to wear her own old silk. But Milly was overjoyed. She was too young to understand the reasons of the long-standing coolness between her parents and their relatives and as she said, Aunt Keturah had lately been much more kind to her. "I believe she is really growing fond of us, mother," she said. "She was ever so nice to us the other day when we were there, and she was awfully pleased that I was going to dance with Lord Heron."

The father and the mother exchanged glances.

"She must have sent to London, or even to Paris, for these dresses," Milly went on in ecstasy. "They are quite as beautiful as Frances's dress, yet not a bit like—"

"Did you tell her about Frances's dress, Milly?" asked the mother, quickly.

"Yes, mother. She always likes to hear about pretty dresses, you know, although she wears such old-fashioned things herself."

"I hope she did not think—anything—"

"What could she think?" said Milly innocently, "not that I was jealous of Frances's frocks, mother dear. Indeed, I told her I wasn't. But we may wear these, may we not? It is so very, very kind of her."

"Wear them and be happy," said her father smiling; and Milly flew off on the wings of the wind to announce the decision to Chloe.

"It is very plain how the idea suggested itself," remarked Mrs. Fleming, somewhat ruefully.

"The child could not have done it better if she had been brought up to consult all Keturah Kettlewell's pet prejudices," said Dr. Fleming with an air of half-repressed annoyance. "I hope nobody will think us capable of doing that. But the description of Frances Corbet's clothes—"

"And the dancing with Lord Heron—"

"Ah, yes, it was just the way to provoke Cousin Keturah into doing an extravagant thing. I'm afraid the dresses are very handsome, are they not, Margaret?"

"Absurdly so. I don't like it at all, Tom. If people hear that she provided dresses—and certainly we could not have afforded anything so beautiful—they will say that she means to leave them her money, and that we are paying court to her for that purpose."

"Never mind what people say, Maggie! We have something better to do than to trouble ourselves about gossip. And as for money—trust Keturah for that. She has long ago vowed that she would not leave us a penny, and I sincerely hope she won't."

"Ah, Tom, you would have had it all very likely, but for me. She used to be so fond of you."

"And I would sooner have my own dear wife than all the riches in the world," said the doctor, putting his arm round her still slender figure, and kissing the gentle face.

It must be confessed that Mrs. Fleming felt herself a very shabby figure beside her exquisitely dressed daughters when they entered the ball-room. Chloe had done her best to renovate her mother's black satin, and to mend the old

lace with which it was trimmed; and Mrs. Fleming was too graceful not to look well; but for once, her girls' unusual brilliance made her nervous and shy. Miss Kettlewell's idea had been magnificent. No girls that night were more beautifully dressed than the country doctor's daughters; and even Frances's stately beauty was scarcely more admired than Chloe's graceful fairness and Milly's kittenish charm.

Certainly many of the guests made no secret of their admiration; and it was very obvious that wherever Chloe went, young Mr. Derrick might be found in close attendance, and that Millicent seemed, in some mysterious manner, to be always in company with Lord Heron, except when he was dancing "duty dances" with partners chosen by his mother.

"I think, dear, you have danced enough with Lord Heron," Mrs. Fleming murmured into Milly's ear, before the evening was over; and Lady Hernesdale said something sharp to her husband concerning their son's partiality for that chit of a doctor's daughter, who was so extraordinarily over-dressed.

"Over-dressed, is she?" said Lord Hernesdale, who was a good-natured man with an eyeglass. "Now she looks to me remarkably simple and good form—all white and no fripperies, you know—"

"You men have no idea what those dresses would cost," said his wife.

"I daresay old Miss Kettlewell provided them," said the Earl, hitting the truth at once, as, in spite of his easy looks, he generally did. "And depend on it, that means she is going to leave them her money. In that case, my dear, Heron would not do badly."

"Nonsense! Old Miss Kettlewell is more likely to endow a hospital for cats," said Lady Hernesdale, and perhaps she was right.

Pretty little Milly, with her flushed smiling face and sparkling eyes, did not know the excitement that she was

creating in the breasts of various parents. Hitherto, nobody had taken much notice of herself and her sister at the very few entertainments at which they had been present. Now they were the observed of all observers. Was it because of their dress? or was it because of the rumor which was flying about the room that Miss Kettlewell had declared them her heiresses? All that Milly cared about was the knowledge that her old playfellow had not forgotten her, that he had danced with her as often as he could, that he had said some strange delightful things that she could never forget, and that she wished the evening would last forever! Charlie was "nicer than ever" she said to herself; he did not tease her now and he said that he had often thought of her while he was at Oxford. Life under these conditions was perfectly beautiful to Milly.

Chloe's sense of enjoyment was more troubled than her sister's. She had many partners, but she distinguished none of them by particular favor. She was conscious throughout the evening of being watched by eyes that were gloomy and reproachful, from under brows that were bent as in displeasure or pain. And she knew why. She had more than half promised a dance to Andrew Derrick, who was there because it was one of Lady Hernesdale's promiscuous olla podrida dances, and because he had won all sorts of honors at Oxford during the preceding year; and she had not kept her promise. She did not quite know why. Perhaps he had not arrived as early as he ought to have done; perhaps she was a little shy; at any rate, by the time that he reached her, her card was full, and he had retired without a word, only watching her afterwards with those reproachful eyes which made her feel uncomfortable.

She tried to make things better a little later in the evening, when her partner had gone to fetch her an ice, and she found Andrew at her elbow, looking disconsolate.

"Are you not dancing?" she asked pleasantly.

"No. I have no heart for dancing since you would not dance with me."

"You came so late," she said, looking down.

"Was that the only reason?"

"The only reason?" she repeated, not understanding his words. There was a little bitterness in his tone as he replied.

"Surely you know what everyone is saying? That you are to inherit your aunt's great wealth; you and your sister are to be co-heiresses? Of course, old friends must be dropped in that case. I see the necessity."

"Mr. Derrick, you have no right to accuse me of a meanness," said Chloe, with dignity. "Besides, there is no foundation for the rumor you have heard."

Her partner returned at that moment, and Andrew moved away with a bow, but there was a look on his face which showed Chloe that she had not made the slightest impression upon his mind by way of convincing him of his error.

Frances, beautifully dressed, as Milly Fleming had said, was one of the most striking figures of the evening. She thought once or twice of the picture which she was said to resemble, but she had no time to visit it, for her card was full, and moreover she did not like to suggest the expedition to any of her partners. No doubt, she said to herself, it was all an old woman's fancy and there was no more likeness to Lady Emmeline in her face than in those of a dozen other girls who had dark eyes and hair. Once or twice she caught the Earl looking at her with a puzzled eye, as if he thought that he ought to know her and could not quite make out her identity. Frances shrank away from him at such moments. What was she, Silas Wedderburn's daughter, that she should think it possible for the Earl of Hernesdale to take any notice of her.

"Are you tired, Frances?" Laurence said once, looking at her as midnight grew near. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Very much indeed," she answered brightly. "And is it not nice to see dear little Milly? And has she not a pretty

dress? Old Miss Kettlewell got it for her and for Chloe too—I quite love her for that.”

“And, by all the powers,” ejaculated Laurence, “here is Miss Kettlewell herself.”

There was a little crowd at the door of the ball-room to see the rich and eccentric old lady, who had come—unbidden, it was said—to the house which she had once hoped to call her own. Her carriage had just driven up to the door, and the Earl himself had been summoned to greet the visitor, who, with her shrinking companion upon her arm, crossed the hall as if she were mistress of the whole place. Her shabby dress had been discarded for a pearl gray satin, and a wonderful erection of costly lace and ostrich feather waved upon her head; diamonds blazed everywhere, on wrists and neck and bodice: her gold-headed stick might have been the wand of some fairy god-mother. Smiling and bowing right and left, she advanced to meet the Earl, to whom she made a prodigious courtesy, quite after the fashion of an extinct school.

“You have often asked me here, my Lord,” she said, her cracked shrill voice sounding high over the music and the buzz of talk, “and I have never accepted your invitation. But to-night I have come, without invitation, to see all once more, and to say good-bye.”

“Mad! Quite mad!” was whispered on every side, and the music stopped suddenly, and the dancers came crowding into the hall to see what was wrong. Miss Wedderburn’s face was white as death; she wore a scanty black silk gown, and carried a cloak on one arm, it was evident that she was terribly frightened and knew not what to do or what to say. But the Earl was quite equal to the situation.

“Miss Kettlewell, I am honored by your appearance. May I conduct you to Lady Hernesdale?”

“Certainly, my Lord, certainly. It is a pleasure to me to be here once more”—and she laughed in a weird fashion, which had no sound of merriment—“and to see my old friends. And my young friends too,” she said, nodding and

smiling as she caught sight of Chloe and Millicent, who, with frightened faces, were very near her, at their mother's side, "my young relations my Lord! Allow me to present them to you and to your friends; my heiresses, my lord, the ladies of King's Leigh! Ah, there will be fine junketing at King's Leigh when I am gone."

A sensation ran through the assembly. Mad though the old lady must be, it was certain that she had named Chloe and Milly Fleming as the successors to her house and her great wealth. The buzz of talk began again as she moved forward, bowing and smiling with the grace of long forgotten days, upon Lord Hernesdale's arm.

"Oh mother, she is out of her mind! Can't we get her away?" said Milly, in an agonized whisper to her mother.

"I am afraid it would excite her too much if I spoke to her," said Mrs. Fleming hurriedly. "Where is your father? Perhaps he could induce her to go. Ah"—in a tone of relief "there is Laurence. He will manage everything. And then, Milly, we ourselves must go."

"Yes, mother," said Milly, with a little quiver in her voice. "Poor, poor Aunt Keturah! I am so sorry for her."

"Don't be frightened," said a warm young voice at her ear. "My father's got the old lady in tow. What does it matter what she says? You needn't mind."

"Oh, Charlie," said the girl, falling back quite unconsciously into her old way of naming him, "I am afraid she is very ill. She never spoke or looked like that before."

"She looks uncommonly jolly," said Lord Heron. "What splendid diamonds she has got on! Oh, don't be alarmed about her, I'm awfully glad she came."

All the more glad in his heart of hearts, because he knew that no shadow of opposition to his love-making would arise, now that Milly was declared one of the heiresses of old Keturah Kettlewell.

Laurence had gone forward, and entered the Library where Miss Kettlewell had been placed in a chair of honor,

with Lord and Lady Hernesdale doing her homage and paying her every attention. Secretly, Lady Hernesdale was furious, and her husband perplexed. It was an incident which seemed likely to spoil the evening's entertainment, for the rumor that Miss Kettlewell was mad had gone abroad and careful mothers were already hurrying their daughters to the cloakroom and ordering their carriages.

The appearance of Laurence seemed to please the old lady. She smiled and nodded and waved her fan at him as he drew near. Frances had followed drawn by a strange fascination until she stood opposite Miss Kettlewell. And Miss Kettlewell nodded and beckoned also to her.

"That's well," she said. "I was once to have married a Hernesdale, as all of you know; but it was not to be. Another generation shall carry out the plans that were then begun, and King's Leigh and Hernesdale, and Heron and Corbet shall all be as they were in days of old."

The listeners shivered. What was she going to say? Lord Heron suddenly flushed scarlet, and Frances, on whom her eyes were resting, turned very pale. Miss Kettlewell uttered an eldritch laugh.

"There she is! Lady Emmeline!" she said, pointing to Frances, and then to a picture above the mantelpiece. "Don't you see it? isn't it a good likeness? Emmeline, you were always a good friend to me," she went on, addressing Frances, "but how is it that you are so young and beautiful still, while I am old and gray?"

There was a strange pause. Frances stood looking at her without a word, and the eyes of the assembly were fixed first on her and then on the picture above the mantelpiece, which represented a dark-eyed girl in white, with a bouquet of white roses in her hand. As it happened, Frances carried white roses too.

"What a wonderful likeness!" someone said.

"But Lady Emmeline died fifty years ago."

The words were not meant to be heard, but they came, most unfortunately, to Miss Kettlewell's ear.



"Do you say that Emmeline is dead?" she cried, throwing up her hands. "Then it is her ghost I see! Oh, Emmeline, my friend! Do you want me? And shall I come?"

She rose to her feet, made a step or two towards Frank, then wavered, tottered, and fell back into her chair. Her face was gray; her eyes closed; her hands fell to her sides. The lonely woman's day was over her life was ebbing fast. They thought it was a corpse that they would have to carry to King's Leigh.

## CHAPTER XII.

## IN THE WAKING HOURS.

the Hernesdales' ball, and its unlooked-for termination, were, of course, the topics of the day. The extraordinary appearance of Miss Kettlewell who, as it speedily appeared, had never been invited; her remarkable dress, diamonds, her airs and graces, would never be forgotten by those who had been present at the scene; and her announcement that Chloe and Milly would inherit her great estate gave a touch of interest to the story, such as might have been lacking if Miss Kettlewell had been less rich or the Flemings less popular. Then, the curious likeness which had now been discerned between the dead Lady Eline and Mr. Corbet's ward, was a most engrossing subject. Even the Earl was startled by it. Frances Corbet had seemed vaguely familiar to him; but he had not connected it with any member of his own family. Now, however, the fact was patent; it was common property; Mr. Corbet was "the exact image" of Lady Emmeline as she had been before her marriage—so people and poor old Miss Kettlewell had mistaken the girl for her friend's ghost and had thought that she herself was doomed to her death by the visitant from another world. It was painful enough for Frances at the time, when she was standing before the old lady, with the group of onlookers pressing nearer, and casting curious glances first at her and then at the picture above the mantelpiece; it was especially painful for Laurence, who began to feel that he had put the girl into a false position, and that it might be necessary for him to make known (much against his will) who she was, and where he had met with her. It was painful also to Lord Hernesdale, who while Miss

Kettlewell was being conveyed to her carriage—for after all, she was not dead, but only insensible, came up to Laurence and touched him on the arm. Frances was cloaking herself with the Flemings in an ante-room, and Laurence waited to see her before he went with Dr. Fleming to King's Leigh. The Earl spoke in a subdued voice.

"I am very sorry for all this, Corbet, and for your aunt's sudden illness."

"I am extremely sorry that we should have been so troublesome to you, my lord," said Laurence, courteously.

"There is one thing I want to ask—this extraordinary likeness of your ward to my Aunt Emmeline; it is quite unmistakable—do you know of any connection—any reason why it should be so?"

"None in the least. I have not the slightest reason to suppose that there can be any connection."

"It is just a curious coincidence, then. I fear that it had a disastrous effect on Miss Kettlewell's mind."

"I am afraid my aunt's illness has been coming on for some time," said Laurence Corbet. "This delusion about Frances has appeared before now. It was nothing new; she had a fixed idea that my ward resembled Lady Emmeline."

"It is not to be wondered at, the likeness is very remarkable."

Laurence felt impatient, but he could say no more, for at that moment Frances appeared, looking white but perfectly composed. He drew her aside and spoke a word in her ear.

"Frances, I must follow Dr. Fleming to my aunt's. Do you mind going back to Denstone without me? I will follow as soon as I am free."

"Oh, no, I don't mind do just as you think best," said Frances without looking up. He could see that she had been much shaken by the scene.

"Poor little girl, keep up!" he murmured softly. "Don't let Mrs. Leslie bother you. Get away to bed as soon as you can, I dare say I shall be back in good time."

The paternal caressing tone had seldom failed to bring a

smile to Frances's face; but on this occasion, she still looked grave. Laurence wondered what was in her mind. He pressed her arm gently with his hand as he drew her forward to make her last farewell and to follow Mrs. Leslie to the carriage. He won a faint, answering smile only when he said good-bye, and even in the anxiety as to his aunt's condition which now took hold of him, he found himself preoccupied by the problem of Frances's extreme pallor and gravity. Could it be that she was in some way angry with him?

Dr. Fleming and Miss Wedderburn had gone with Miss Kettlewell to King's Leigh. Thither Laurence repaired with all possible speed; and found the doctor and the companion engaged in something like wordy warfare, in a sitting-room leading out of Miss Kettlewell's room.

"Who is with her?" said Laurence, breaking in upon the conference.

"A trained nurse from the Rushton infirmary," said the Doctor. "I sent a special message for her at once and I think it would be well, Mr. Corbet, if you, as Miss Kettlewell's nearest relation, would represent to Miss Wedderburn that the course we are taking is the usual and desirable one."

"What do you mean?" said Laurence, turning to Miss Wedderburn with some sharpness. "Any course that Dr. Fleming recommends is of course the right one. Have you anything to say against it?"

"I object sir," said Miss Wedderburn, in a singularly unpleasant voice. "I object. I strongly object."

"And to what do you object?"

"I object to the choice of a nurse. I object to Dr. Fleming as a doctor. I think another doctor should be called in; and I think that a London nurse should be procured, and no one who is under Dr. Fleming's influence."

"Do you know what you are saying?" queried Laurence sternly. "Do you know that you are making a most extraordinary insinuation?"

"The woman's mad I think," said Dr. Fleming, in an irritated undertone.

"No, I am not mad," said Miss Wedderburn, facing round upon him determinedly. "But I am clear-sighted—too clear-sighted for you and your family. Dr. Fleming I have long noticed the efforts you were making to secure an influence over the mind of my dear and esteemed employer; and in her present condition, I think it would be well if she had those around her who could be trusted, and who were unlikely to be influenced by mercenary considerations."

"In plain English," burst out the doctor, who was hot-tempered and not given to measuring his words, "this woman, Laurence, accuses me of wishing to get my poor old cousin out of the way, and insinuates that I am ready to commit murder for my private ends."

"After insulting one of Miss Kettlewell's relations in this way," said Laurence, looking steadily at Miss Wedderburn, "you do not expect I suppose, to remain in Miss Kettlewell's house? I will write you a check at once for anything that may be owing to you."

"Excuse me, sir," said Miss Wedderburn, drawing herself up with lofty disdain, "but I shall wait for my employer's dismissal—or death—before I go. I am sure that she would wish me to remain near her, and therefore, unless she herself dismisses me, I shall stay."

Dr. Fleming and Laurence exchanged significant glances. They knew that she was within her right. They could not turn her out of King's Leigh as long as she was in Miss Kettlewell's employ, and Miss Kettlewell was still living. They had no power to bid her go, if she preferred to stay. But one thing they could do, and they did it. Dr. Fleming, after formally asking Laurence's permission, gave orders that Miss Wedderburn was not to be admitted to Miss Kettlewell's room; and also suggested that a London doctor and a London nurse should be telegraphed for at once.

"Send for Birkett," said Laurence, naming a famous London specialist, "and consult with him if you like, but of

course, we have perfect confidence in your treatment, Dr. Fleming. I think it would be as well, Miss Wedderburn, if you were to retire to your own room. You are scarcely needed here; and possibly you may require some rest."

He maintained a manner of perfect politeness, but there was something in his face which made Lavinia Wedderburn afraid of him. She hesitated, tried to protest, then yielded to the grim command of his eyes, and reluctantly left the room.

But before the door closed, she turned and uttered a menacing word.

"You may be sorry for this some day," she said. Then she was gone.

"What on earth does she mean?" said Corbet in a vexed tone. "Is she off her head? Never mind her, Fleming; she is annoyed that the money does not seem to be coming her way, that's the long and the short of it."

"She puts me into a very awkward position," said the doctor. "Of course I see that it is spite—the spite of disappointment because of what that poor demented old woman said about my girls, but I assure you, Laurence, that I had rather they were poor all their lives than that we were accused of scheming and plotting for the sake of Keturah Kettlewell's money. By jove, if she has left it to the girls, I shall feel inclined to advise them to have nothing to do with it."

"You couldn't do that very well, I think," said Laurence. "Besides, the most dignified thing is to despise the evil thoughts of evil minds, and act as you think right. You have attended Aunt Keturah for years, and you must not leave her now—just because of that woman's spiteful speeches."

"I will come if you desire it," said Dr. Fleming rather stiffly, "but I will ask you to call in Dr. Spencer as well as myself, and we will meet Sir Jabez in consultation."

"Don't take it to heart, old man. Nobody that knows you could suspect you of a meanness" said Laurence af-

fectionately, and the two men exchanged a warm grasp of the hand before dropping the subject, as if by mutual consent.

"How was it that the poor old lady took it into her head to go out to-night?" Corbet asked a little later, of the old housekeeper who came to meet him with a troubled face.

"Well, sir, I suppose it was with hearing Miss Milly talk about it, and then the getting of the dresses from London and so on she grew excited over it, and begun to talk of the old days at Heronsdale, you know—almost wandering like; and then, sir, I don't like to make mischief but that Miss Wedderburn, sir—"

"Well?" said Laurence, as the woman paused.

"She seemed to me to be exciting my mistress, sir, making her talk of the old days on purpose, and saying 'Why don't you go to Heronsdale? Why don't you go to-night?' I heard her, sir; until my mistress flew into a sort of wild state and said 'Yes I will,' and ordered the carriage and made me help to get out her diamonds, until I thought she had gone clean, stark, staring mad!"

"You ought to have stopped her, Mrs. Green," Laurence said.

"What could I do, sir? My mistress isn't an easy one to stop when she has set her heart on doing a thing; and Miss Wedderburn kept on encouraging of her, though I think she was frightened at last and wanted to undo what she had done. But it is Miss Wedderburn you must blame, sir, not me."

"What was her object, I wonder?" Laurence mused to himself, as he stretched himself on the couch provided for him at King's Leigh, where Dr. Fleming also stayed the night. "Is it that my poor old aunt has made a will lately which Miss Wedderburn hopes to set aside on the score of insanity? It looks as though that might be it. A dangerous woman. A dangerous relation for Frances, if her true parentage becomes known."

He could not sleep, and his thoughts turned again to

Frances and to the pallor and gravity of her face when she had said good-night. What was it that she had been thinking of? Was she simply nervous and "upset," as women say, by the exceeding painfulness of the whole scene? Or was it that some perception had come to her of the strangeness and difficulty of her position, and was she thinking of some way of escape?

Laurence hoped not. He had tried so hard to make her happy; and yet, if she were not happy, what was he to do? He recalled the days when she had been but a child, when he had gradually won her affection, and taken a delight in showing her what was interesting and beautiful in the world. He remembered the happy days he had spent with her in different Continental cities, in Switzerland, in Italy, on the Rhine, before she became old enough to require more of a chaperon than himself and a governess. She had seemed contented enough, then. Truly of late a spirit of dissatisfaction had entered into her, and made her show some fatigue of their constant wanderings; and then it had been that Laurence had decided to bring her home to Denstone, and introduce her to the County as his ward.

It would have been easy to do, he fancied, but for Miss Keturah Kettlewell and the Wedderburns. Who would have imagined that Silas Wedderburn and his cousin could have found their way to Rushton and King's Leigh? The meeting with her father had revived the girl's saddest memories. Then Miss Kettlewell had disturbed her mind by connecting her with the Heron family, as if Frances could possibly have any connection with the Heron family, Laurence said peevishly to himself.

But Miss Kettlewell's appearance at the ball and the wild words she had used, would certainly set people talking. There would be a general chorus of "Who is she?" And unless Laurence Corbet and Frances were prepared boldly to acknowledge that she was the daughter of Silas Wedderburn, there would be no end of gossip, no end of tiresome queries no end of doubt and speculation and false report.



Laurence winced at the thought of things that might be said.

And supposing that she were known as Silas Wedderburn's daughter, what then?

Why, then—Laurence could not help acknowledging it to himself—there would probably be a storm of indignation amongst the County families, to whom he had introduced her as his ward. They would say that he had deceived them, that he had brought into their midst a Dissenting minister's daughter, of low birth, of humble origin, whom none of them wanted to know. They would promptly turn the cold shoulder to Frances—and to himself, but for himself that would not matter. For Frances, it would be a painful and humiliating affair. He had never allowed anyone to look down on her, but here he could have no chance of protecting her, she would be patronized or coldly shunned, and he did not think that Frances would brook either patronage or coldness very easily.

Perhaps he exaggerated the dangers and difficulties of her position. At any rate, it seemed to him that he had put Frances into a very embarrassing situation and that it was his duty to get her out of it. Should he propose to her to go abroad again? Or—should he ask her to become his wife, and be Frances Corbet in reality, and no longer Frances Wedderburn?

His blood ran faster in his veins, his heart began to beat madly, as he thought of this possibility. His wife? Frances as his wife? Well, why not? And the tumult subsided a little as he thought of the extreme suitability of such an arrangement. It seemed to him as though this had been what he had intended all along, although he had not been conscious of seriously thinking of it until this moment.

When should he ask her? Would it be decent to ask her while his aunt was upon her death-bed? He thought it would—if, as Dr. Fleming had said, Miss Kettlewell was likely to live some days. It would be a complete answer to any questions asked of him or of her. The wedding could

take place very shortly, no one would expect him to mourn very long for his old aunt. And then they could do as they chose about recognizing Silas Wedderburn, it would not matter though all the world knew whose daughter she was, if she was also Laurence Corbet's wife: he was perfectly satisfied with the wisdom of his decision, and he resolved that as soon as he could be spared in the morning and if Miss Kettlewell were no worse, he would walk over to Denstone in the morning and settle matters with Frances without further delay.

It was strange that he never asked himself whether Frances would accept him or not. He took it as a matter of course that she should.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE.

The autumn morning was crisp and fresh with a touch of frost in the air, as Laurence walked from King's Leigh to Denstone on the day after the Hernesdale ball. He had heard from Dr. Fleming that no change in Miss Kettlewell's condition could as yet be expected, and that it was not at all necessary that her nephew should remain at hand. He could be summoned at any time, for the distance between King's Leigh and Denstone was not more than five or six miles; and he left stringent orders that he should be sent for should any change occur. "There may be a last rally before death," Dr. Fleming had said to him, "but it will be only the flicker of a flame in the socket."

The London nurses would arrive in the afternoon, and Sir Jabez by the evening train; Laurence intended to be at King's Leigh again before that time. In the meantime the nurse from Rushton ruled the sick-room and was assisted by Chloe Fleming, who, as everyone knew, was excellent in a sick-room. Mrs. Fleming and Milly came to the house for part of the day, to be there in case of need; but they were not permitted to enter Miss Kettlewell's room. The old lady lay silent and motionless, but nobody could be quite certain of how much she saw and understood; therefore, as she had a fierce animosity to Mrs. Fleming, and as Milly shrank a little from seeing anyone who was so near death ("unless," as she said "she could do anything to help") the mother and daughter remained downstairs.

Miss Wedderburn was invisible. She had locked herself into her own room and rigidly refused to leave it. She asked for food to be sent up to her, and Mrs. Green herself brought her meals to the door—not allowing any of the

maids to go near her lest they should be questioned or bribed to do the companion's bidding. Both Laurence and Dr. Fleming would have been glad to get her out of the house; but she positively refused to go, and they could not turn her out by force.

After the excitement and agitation of the night, Laurence was glad to find himself in the fresh air, and on the high road to Denstone. His mind was full of the decision at which he had arrived; and the more he thought of it, the more he was pleased by its appropriateness to the situation. Frances was the ideal wife for him; she knew his tastes, sympathized with his pursuits, was fond of him already. Denstone wanted a mistress; and he should be proud of the mistress whom he was about to give it. And Frances would of course not say him nay.

It was not long since he had said to himself when contemplating the possibility of this marriage, that it would not be fair to ask Frances to marry him until she had seen a little more of English society. He now realized that it was more difficult than he had anticipated to launch an unknown and friendless girl upon County society, and expect the world to be at her feet. His simple statement that she was his ward was not sufficient. It remained to be seen whether her elevation to the rank of his wife would or would not make a difference. Laurence thought that it would.

There was no white figure to greet him as he came within sight of the garden, no one to hail him gleefully and show him the blossoms gathered for the dinner-table, or bring him the letters and papers that had arrived by the morning's post. He supposed that Frances was still resting after the fatigues of the previous night. But when he looked into the dining-room and surprised Mrs. Leslie at a very late breakfast, she told him that Frances had been down for some time, and had gone into the library. Thither he at once proceeded, saying to himself that there was no use in delay. Yet he was surprised to find his heart beating fast

and his hand was not quite steady as he turned the handle of the door. Yet why should he be nervous—why should he fear to meet the eyes of a girl, of a mere child like Frances Wedderburn.

She looked up when he came in, as if she had expected him. She was standing on the hearthrug before the fire, with one foot on the fender as if she were feeling cold. She looked cold, Laurence noticed; she was pale with dark shadows under her eyes and her complexion a little clouded; there was a sort of eclipse upon her beauty, as though she stood in a shadow of grief and pain. Laurence was half-startled, half-vexed by it; his associations with Frances were chiefly those of joy and health and successful enterprise. The thought suddenly flashed across his mind that it was the first time that he had seen her look like Silas Wedderburn.

"Well, Frances?" he said, stepping forward. He meant to kiss her lightly on the forehead, as he had done, in quality of her guardian, every night and morning that she had been in his company since she was a child; but on this occasion he refrained—perhaps because he thought the salute would not be in keeping with the words he had come to utter, perhaps because she turned her head aside. "How are you this morning?"

"Quite well, thank you." The answer had a mechanical ring. "And how is Miss Kettlewell, please?"

He gave her a rapid summary of the doctor's opinion, and of all that had taken place since he last saw her—not even sparing her the story of Miss Wedderburn's behavior, although he perceived that it made her wince. But when he had finished, she did not say a word.

"You would have to hear all this sooner or later, you know," he said, thinking she was wounded. "The Flemings would be sure to tell you if I did not."

"Yes, it is better to be prepared," said Frances quietly. "Of course, the actions of one's relations always reflect to some extent on oneself."

"Not in this case, because nobody knows that she is your relation."

"I am beginning to think that people had better know."

"Frank by name and frank by nature—I know you are that; but there is a limit to frankness, it must be guided by reason not by the impulse of the moment," said Laurence, settling himself with his back to the mantelpiece, and smiling down at her as at a child. He was surprised to see that she turned away quickly, and sat down in the easy-chair by the side of the hearth. He said to himself that he had never before seen Frances show a trace of sulkiness. And yet, at that moment, it looked—almost—as though she sulked.

"It would do you no good, my dear girl, and it would complicate matters very much, for me and for all of us, if you suddenly revealed your relationship to the Wedderburns. Especially at this moment, when Miss Wedderburn has been acting—well, let us say, with a trifle more zeal than discretion"—and Mr. Corbet's handsome face lent itself to the semblance of a sneer. "The Flemings are now very friendly with you; but if one who was known to be your cousin accused them of obtaining my Aunt Keturah's money by undue influence and even of not attending to her properly in her last illness—which means murder—"

"Oh, don't, please don't," cried Frances suddenly but in a very much subdued and stifled voice. "I don't know how to bear it—"

"Why, Frances, my dear child," said Laurence, with an accent of real concern, "you are troubling yourself unnecessarily, "What is there for you to care about in Miss Wedderburn's doings?"

"She is—my father's cousin, I suppose," said the girl.

"But—such a father!" came from Laurence, almost involuntarily. He spoke below his breath, but Frances heard what he said, and he was at once sorry that he had said it.

"Yes, such a father," she repeated, raising her head.

"That is just the worst of it. He abandoned me, he was cowardly as you have often said, and I gave him up; but the older I grow, the less it seems right to me that I should give him up in this way. The more you make me ashamed of him, the more you say against my cousin Lavinia Wedderburn, the more I feel that I ought to cast in my lot with theirs, and take what would follow, patiently."

"What would follow? What do you mean, Frances?"

"Do you suppose," said the girl, with new warmth on her cheek and new light in her eyes, "that Lady Hernesdale would have asked me to her ball last night if she had known me only as the daughter of Silas Wedderburn? Do you think that the Flemings would have been as kind and good to me as they have, if they had known that I was Lavinia Wedderburn's cousin? I am obtaining kindness and friendship by false pretenses, and I do not like it: indeed I don't think I can bear it any longer. I would rather be known as—what I am."

"You are not wise," said Laurence, in a hesitating way. "You see, Frances, it is not as though we were concealing anything wrong: in fact, there are some persons who would consider your history and—and origin, a very creditable one. It is not in order to gain social esteem that you ceased to call yourself Frances Wedderburn; it was because we both felt that your father was unworthy of you and that it would be a constant pain and grief to you to live in his house again. You would never be able to forget the day on which he acted on the belief that his life was so valuable that he could sacrifice that of his own child to preserve it."

There was the ring of illimitable scorn, which Frances had so often heard in the man's low voice.

"It would be painful, no doubt," she answered; "and I should not go so far as to wish to live in his house; but I think that the world should know that I am Mr. Wedderburn's daughter."

"Let them know, then," said Laurence eagerly, "but let them know at the same time that you will never bear it."

"I could not do that. If I acknowledge the relationship, I should bear his name."

"Not if you married—"

"It is possible," said Frances rather drearily, "that no man of any worth would wish to marry me knowing the truth—and under the circumstances."

"Don't you think me a man of worth, Frank?"

"You! But you are different—you are my guardian—"

"I would rather be a great deal more than that," said Laurence, the agitation that he had previously felt making itself somewhat evident in his voice and manner. "The best and easiest way of managing the matter would be—if you would consent to be—my wife."

He found himself incapable of expressing himself less awkwardly. He watched her face, and a change in it—a change that seemed to show she had received a shock.

"Laurence," she said, "Mr. Corbet!—I did not expect this from you."

"Why not?" asked Laurence boldly. "Don't you see that this is the best way out of all our difficulties? As my wife, you would have nothing to fear from evil tongues; we could get your father out of the way, so that nobody would remember him even if it were known that he—"

"You forget," she said, with effort, "that no one supposes my father to be a bad man. I myself think him—a—a good man. Not every good man is physically brave. There is nothing against him in the eyes of the world."

"That is true; but there is a sort of—social difference, for all that," said Laurence, who was losing his temper and his head at the same time. And Frances's face flashed into sudden wrath as she replied.

"Do you think it is for you to tell me that?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon, I did not mean that it altered my views. But I thought you yourself had felt difficulties, and that in this manner we could solve them—"

"I never thought of marriage simply as a way of solving difficulties," said Frances, biting her lips. Her tone was



icily cold; her eyes were loftily averted, but there was a look of repressed suffering in her face which cut Laurence to the heart. He took his arm down from the mantelpiece, and came nearer to her chair.

"Frances, my dear," he said, "little Frances—don't look like that! I did not mean to hurt you. I was trying to think of what was best—that was all."

She tried to answer in the old proud way, then a convulsive sob cut short her attempt at speech, and shook her from head to foot. She covered her face with her hands and burst into tears—not soft, gentle tears, such as Laurence had fancied that women shed, but into strong, passionate weeping which revealed the depths of her bitterness, the infinite aching of her heart. Laurence breathed a word now and then, feeling himself profoundly guilty and miserable; but he dared not touch her, dared not kiss her as he would have done a few weeks earlier, when she was in trouble; he could only wait and listen and wish that he had never said a word. It was unspeakably painful to him to see Frances cry like this; and each sob rent his heart.

She grew quieter at last, and found him walking about the room with quick restless movements, as if bent upon hearing and seeing as little of her grief as possible. She tried to control her tears, but she had words to say and she felt that she must say them, whether they brought back those terrible sobs or not. Poor Frances was not at all accustomed to shedding tears; and her own emotion was rather dreadful to her. Laurence stood still, amazed to hear himself attacked.

"How could you think of such a thing?" said the girl passionately. "Did you think I was a child still, or a chatel, a doll, to be played with and disposed of and arranged for in that way? Did you think I should give myself to—to—anyone, just because it was convenient under the circumstances? That it would get us out of an awkward predicament, and make things smooth and easy again? Did you think I would marry on those terms?"

"I thought it would be better—for you," said Laurence, distressfully.

"Better for me! Oh, Laurence, I thought you held me higher than that. You forget that even if I am only Silas Wedderburn's daughter, I am a woman, and I need—I need—"

Her voice failed her; the sobs rose again in her throat.

"Yes, Frances; you need—what?"

She choked down the tears. She must say now what she had begun to say. She must make him understand.

"Every woman needs love. I could not marry without—love. To ask a woman to marry you for any other motive, Laurence, it is base, wicked, unworthy of you! And it is an insult to the woman, too. Oh, Laurence, I did not expect it from you. I thought I could have trusted you."

"Good heavens, Frances, don't you see that it is only my—my—affection for you that prompted me to ask you to be my wife?" said Laurence hoarsely. "I could not have asked you if I had not loved you—"

"As a child! As a girl whom you have brought up and educated and been kind to! Ah, yes, I liked that kind of love! I am grateful for it; I—I hope—I return it! But you have spoilt it all now."

"Forget it then," said Laurence, abruptly. He came and stood before her, looking down at the ruffled bronze head with a strangely tender expression in his eyes. "Never think of it again. I did not mean to hurt you. Forgive and forget, Frances; we will never allude to it again."

She put her hand into his, at once. But there was a curious resoluteness in her voice.

"Forgive? Oh, yes, I forgive—you meant it as kindness, and you did not know what you were doing. Laurence, I can't bear to think that you do not understand better—that you do not see how terrible it is to ask a woman whom you do not love to marry you. I wish—I wish—you would promise me not to do so again—for any reason, or any woman in the world."

"I will gladly promise," he said, in a low tone. "Never again, Frances—until I ask the woman that I love. And then, I promise you, she will make no mistake as to whether I love her or not."

She did not quite understand the inflection of his voice. But she rose up, holding out her hands.

"Forgive me too, Laurence, I scarcely know what I have said. But I did not mean to hurt you—or to cry! We will arrange our difficulties in some other way."

"Some other way," assented Laurence, languidly. He felt as though he were exhausted by some great effort, some great emotion. He did not know exactly what was the matter with him. But he fancied, as he sat on in the library, when his ward had crept away, that his stupefaction was caused partly from the discovery that Frances was a woman, not a child.

And also, that, being a woman, he loved her. And he had done the very thing that would tend to alienate and disgust her; he had asked her to marry him without saying a word of love.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## CHLOE'S SECRET.

The great Sir Jabez came, and endorsed all that had been done by Dr. Fleming and Dr. Spencer; the grand London nurses took possession of Miss Kettlewell's bed-room and banished even the infirmiry nurse, as well as Mrs. Green; Miss Wedderburn was also excluded, but Chloe Fleming was allowed to come and go as she pleased, for her presence seemed to soothe the patient, although she still lay apparently unconscious on her bed. And there was a sort of satisfaction in Chloe's heart at being thus admitted, and in ministering to Miss Kettlewell's comforts in any little way that lay at hand; for she was a sweet-natured girl, and all Aunt Keturah's sharpness to her in the days of her childhood was forgotten in the memory of later years, when she had been undoubtedly kind. And as Chloe came so often, Milly too grew into the habit of creeping into the sick-room, and standing for a little while beside the motionless white figure with the sunken, wrinkled features, and the half-closed eyes. At first, Milly shuddered, for the face and form upon the bed were very deathly in appearance; but after a time she grew bolder, and did not mind even being left alone with Miss Keturah while the nurses were having their daily walk, or Chloe had gone down to see a visitor.

There was a slight movement of the tired eyelids, a faint motion of the hands, when Millicent or Chloe, spoke, which encouraged Dr. Fleming to think that the old lady was more conscious than she seemed of what went on around her; and he cautioned everyone who came into the sick-room to be very cautious as to what they said or did in Miss Kettlewell's presence. "It is my belief that she sees and hears far more than you might imagine," he declared.

Possibly he was right. Possibly Miss Kettlewell was quite aware that the two graceful girls were sorry for her and did not grudge the time they spent in her darkened room. Perhaps she knew that of her two professional nurses, one was conscientious and hard-working, and the other careless and insincere. Perhaps she disliked to be left alone with the careless nurse at night, and wondered where her faithful Lavinia had gone—who knows? In the long silent hours, she lay still, moving only a finger or an eyelid from time to time, incapable of signifying her wishes, of manifesting her likes or dislikes. Even the low moaning noise which at first she had made when Mrs. Fleming had approached her had died away; she lay as silent now as in that long last sleep which she was nearing every day.

Chloe had a vague suspicion that the nurse who took the night-work was not quite as careful or as wakeful as she ought to be. She judged from trifles only and did not like to speak to her father on the subject; but she resolved to take certain steps by which she hoped to ascertain whether Nurse Ellen were trustworthy or not. It was foreign to her nature to do anything that seemed underhand; yet to do openly what she meant to do would be to defeat her own ends. So she resorted to innocent stratagem.

Miss Kettlewell's bed-room was a very spacious one, and entered from a dressing-room, which led into a corridor. On that side of the bed-room opposite the dressing-room door, stood a massive hanging cupboard which extended almost to the fireplace. Very few people knew that inside this closet or hanging cupboard, there was a door opening into a sitting-room, from which by another door and a narrow flight of stairs, the upper rooms of the house could be reached.

There was no secret about this door, and all the regular occupants of King's Leigh were well aware of it. It was probable, however, that the nurses had not been told of its existence, for it was half hidden by the cloaks and dresses that hung upon the walls. Miss Kettlewell usually kept

the door of the wardrobe locked, but during her illness it was often left half open, as the nurses found it a convenient place in which to hang a cloak or dressing gown which they wanted at night.

Mrs. Fleming and Milly returned home one evening without Chloe, who usually accompanied them. They accounted for her absence by saying that she had said she should like to sleep at King's Leigh that night, and they were a little surprised to see that Dr. Fleming looked a trifle startled by the announcement. "Does Chloe think her worse?" he asked.

"Oh no, I don't think so," his wife answered. "It is only a fancy of hers."

"My dear, Chloe is not the girl to take fancies without good reason into her head."

"If Miss Kettlewell were worse, would not Nurse Ellen have spoken to me and sent you a message?"

"Possibly," said the doctor, with a thoughtful look. "But I don't know that Nurse Ellen is very observant. And Chloe—it's a curious thing, but Chloe has a distinct gift of diagnosis. I have noticed it very often, I am afraid she thinks the old lady not so well to-night."

"If it were not so late—" his wife began. Dr. Fleming looked at the clock. He had just come in from a long country round, and it was after ten. He was tired and hungry, and the supper had just been placed upon the table. He cast a wistful glance at it, and then at the clock.

"I'll take a mouthful or two," he said, compromising the matter. "And then I'll stroll over to King's Leigh, it's not much of a walk. I should like to see Keturah again to-night. You may depend upon it, Margaret, Chloe has not stayed for nothing."

"But everybody will be in bed, if you go so late," objected Mrs. Fleming.

"Not old John. I've often had a chat with old John at eleven o'clock at night. He prowls round the house every night in order to see that there are no burglars about the

place. I shall go and look up old John, and if I think fit, I'll walk up and have a look at poor old Keturah. I don't feel easy about her; if Chloe thought her worse, you may be sure there is something in it."

"I hope you will put as much faith in me when I am a doctor, as you do in Chloe now," said Milly, nodding at him.

"You a doctor, you madcap!" said her father, looking up with twinkling eyes. "I think I see you at it. No, no, your fate won't be that of a doctor, my child."

"More likely, that of a Countess," was in the mind of father and mother alike; they had noticed Lord Heron's attentions to Milly, and they knew that the Earl was poor. If Milly and Chloe were to be Miss Kettlewell's co-heiresses, there was no saying what might not happen.

"I should like to be a doctor of all things," said Milly with a pout. "And you are the second person to-day who has said that I should not be one!"

"Who was the first?" asked the father, vigorously attacking the hashed mutton.

"Oh, only Charlie. He told me—"

"Charlie, eh? Charlie, who?"

"Dear Milly, you must call him Lord Heron," said her mother reproachfully.

"Mother dear, I can't! I always forget. I told him so to-day, and I'm sure he doesn't mind. He said he hoped I would call him Charlie to the very end of his life! So there!" said Milly triumphantly.

"And he says you are not to be a doctor?" said her father, although Mrs. Fleming looked daggers at him for asking the question.

"He says that if I do he shall become a medical student too, so as to look after me and see that I come to no harm," said Milly with a merry laugh. "What nonsense boys talk, do they not, father?"

"I daresay," said the doctor. "I suppose I talked non-

sense in my time too. It's no good taking it in sober earnest, Milly."

"Oh, I know that," said his daughter, and a very little flush of rose-color stole into her pretty cheeks. "I never believe anything Charlie—I mean Lord Heron—says. By the bye, father"—rather hastily changing the subject—"if you go to King's Leigh to-night don't you say anything about Chloe being there, if you can help it. It's a plot between her and Mrs. Green. Nobody else knows."

"Milly! are you sure of that?" said her mother.

"Perfectly sure. She's got some idea about somebody—and she wants to see for herself whether it's true. But I wasn't to say a word about it, for Chloe doesn't like a fuss."

Dr. Fleming pushed away his plate. "What do you mean, child? Tell me at once."

His voice sounded so stern that Milly looked up amazed. "It's nothing wrong, father," she said remonstratingly.

"It may not be wrong, but it may be very necessary for me to know," he said. "Tell me what it is without delay."

"Well, Chloe will be very angry with me," said Milly, who had not the slightest fear of her father. "But I'll tell you, of course, if you really think you ought to know. Chloe doesn't think that Nurse Ellen keeps awake during the night; so she means to come into the dressing-room at twelve or one o'clock, that she may see whether everything is right or not; whether Nurse Ellen is on the watch, or whether she is comfortably slumbering in that big arm chair before the fire."

"And that is all?" said Dr. Fleming.

"Yes, that's all. The only difficulty will be if the dressing-room door is shut, because it opens with such a dreadful creak. If it is, Chloe thought of going round by way of the wardrobe door, you know."

"I know. But Chloe ought to have told me as soon as she had any suspicion of the nurse."

"She said she did not like to say anything unless she was certain. It was Nurse Ellen talking so much about her



wakeful nights, and yet not caring to lie down in the daytime that made Chloe suspicious. She noticed, too, that Cousin Keturah's medicine had not always been given during the night; and she saw the nurse pour away quite half a bottle of it."

Dr. Fleming groaned. "I wouldn't have believed it," he said. "Why, I had the most excellent references \* \* Chloe ought to have told me at once \* \* \* I had bet-go to King's Leigh myself, and see whether I can take the nurse by surprise. Keturah ought to be most carefully watched."

He was on his feet by this time, and comparing his watch with the clock. "Only half past ten, by the right time," he said, "and old John won't be in bed for an hour or more. I shall go at once, and shall probably spend the rest of the night there. Don't wait up for me."

"Don't spoil Chloe's plans," said Milly with the impertinence of a much indulged younger daughter. "If you go walking straight upstairs with those heavy boots of yours, father, you'll waken everybody in the house, including the sinner herself—"

"I shall be careful," said Dr. Fleming impatiently. "I shall see for myself, that is all. It was foolish of Chloe not to consult me."

He said good-night to his wife and daughter, and went out abruptly. Milly looked after him with a rueful air. "Do you think he'll be careful?" she asked her mother anxiously. And Mrs. Fleming answered with a laugh.

"Surely your father knows how to manage his own cases, Milly."

"Yes, but I'm not sure that he won't spoil Chloe's little plot," said the irrepressible Milly. "And I don't like Nurse Ellen; she's a hypocrite; and I believe she has made friends with that horrid Miss Wedderburn."

"Milly, you ought to have told your father that," said Mrs. Fleming with a start.

"Now, mother, what's the good of telling father and put-

ting him into a fume, all about such a trifle as that? It was only that I saw Miss Wedderburn talking to Nurse Ellen in the corridor. And I thought it such a remarkable sight that I stood still and stared, and then they saw me and separated in a great hurry, and Nurse Ellen said in an apologetic kind of way, 'Miss Wedderburn wanted to know how Miss Kettlewell was to-day.' But I knew better than that; they had got their heads very close together, they were colloquing over something or other—now, mother, what is the matter? you have turned quite pale."

"Nothing is the matter, dear, said Mrs. Fleming, trying to recover herself. "Except that I am always a little afraid of what Miss Wedderburn may say or do next. She is a very designing woman, and a very malignant one. I wish she were out of the house—I'm afraid she will do mischief if she stays."

Milly's eyes grew large and round. "You don't think mother, that she will try to do any harm to Cousin Keturah—to poison her, perhaps, or anything?"

"Silly child, of course I do not. I only think that she may make mischief by saying unkind and disagreeable things. So let us go quietly to bed and not think of her any more. On the whole, I am glad your father has gone to King's Leigh to-night."

Dr. Fleming, however, was not in the best of tempers as he betook himself to his cousin's home. He felt that he had been kept in the dark, and this was a situation not exactly agreeable to him. It seemed as though Chloe, too, had been more watchful than himself, and had discerned faults in the nurses which he with all his experience, had not been able to discover. But as he walked briskly along the road in the light of a late October moon, he began to recover his spirits and his temper. He remembered that Chloe was only a woman after all; and it was astonishing how much comfort that reflection brought to him. Women always exaggerate, always suspect each other, he said to himself with disgust. Probably the nurse was doing her

duty thoroughly, and Chloe was wasting her time and strength in spying upon her. Faugh! he did not like the idea. He must caution Chloe against giving way to womanish fancies. He was surprised indeed to think that she could allow them a place in her mind at all.

Thus musing, he came in sight of King's Leigh, a confused mass of broken roofs, gables, chimneys, as it seemed to him in the darkness, with the moonlight silvering the walls and lying in a great flood upon the terrace and the lawn. Dr. Fleming knew his way. He struck out a side path, which led from the avenue to a side-door, at which he tapped softly. It was opened almost immediately by old John, the almost superannuated butler, who had known the doctor when he was a boy.

"Eh, doctor, it's you, is it?" was old John's greeting. "You're late, bain't you?"

"Yes, rather. How's your mistress to-night, John?"

"The missis says she's just as usual." "The missis" was Mrs. Green, the housekeeper, with whom John waged a deadly feud, varied by moments of cordial and intimate friendship. "Miss Chloe's here to-night, she tells me, though nobody was to know."

"Ah, yes," said the doctor.

"She wants to look after them nurses and Miss Wedderburn too," said John, speaking in a hoarse whisper. "She have an idea that th' ould lady's not attended to, proper. And you know what Chloe was allus like, doctor, ever since she were a little 'un. For all so sweet as she looks, if she wants a thing, she've got to have her way."

"Ay," said Chloe's father, recognizing a family trait. "You're right there, John."

"So she's staying, and Miss Wedderburn and the nurses and the maids don't know nowt of it. They think she went home with her mar. The missis made up a bed for her, but I don't believe she's going to bed this night.

"I think, John," said Dr. Fleming with deliberation, "that I should like to go upstairs and take a look at your

mistress. You needn't light me up, and you needn't call Mrs. Green. Just give me a candle and a box of matches, and I'll make out my own way."

John grumbled a little at not being allowed to accompany him, but the doctor was firm in doing things his own way. He crept along the passage, with John at his heels, to the foot of the back staircase which led up to the corridor in which Miss Kettlewell's room was situated. He left John standing at the foot of the stairs, while he mounted them step by step in silence; for the oak boards creaked beneath his feet, and the balustrade seemed to groan as he laid his hand upon it. From the staircase window, a silver radiance streamed upon the paneled walls.

Suddenly, through the silence of the house a bell sent forth a strange clanging sound, as if it were pulled by hasty frightened hands which knew not how hard they clung. Then a strange cry echoed from one of the upper rooms. It was a cry for help. Coming suddenly into the midst of that moonlit stillness, it had a blood-curdling effect and it was a woman's voice.

The two men forgot their endeavor to tread softly, and rushed up the stairs to Miss Kettlewell's room.

## CHAPTER XV.

## THE FLAME IN THE SOCKET.

Chloe's preparations had not been of any very mysterious or alarming character. She had merely prevailed upon Mrs. Green (who heartily sympathized with her in her suspicions of Nurse Ellen) to make up a bed for her in the sitting-room next Miss Kettlewell's bedroom, which could be entered by the door in the wardrobe if necessary. From this room she could hear quite well a great deal of what passed in Miss Kettlewell's chamber, the tinkling of glasses, the moving of chairs, and what seemed to Chloe a great deal of unnecessarily noisy preparation for the night. She resolved to sleep in this room every night unless her father forbade her to do so, for she was sure that the knowledge of her presence would tend to make the nurse's movements gentler and less careless. She was sure that there would not have been all that turmoil and confusion in the sick woman's room if Nurse Ellen had known that one of the patient's relations was within hearing.

Chloe felt herself something of a traitress. She reproached herself for not having told the nurse what she meant to do. She liked to be fair and straightforward. But at the same time she saw that if she had told the nurse that she was going to sleep in the next room, her purpose would have been frustrated. After this first night, Nurse Ellen might know and welcome. But she first wished to know what was going on when nobody was at hand to check the nurse's ways of dealing with her patient. It had seemed wrong several times to Chloe that none of Miss Kettlewell's relations should be staying in the house at night. Dr. Fleming and Mr. Corbet had spent two or three nights there, certainly, and Mrs. Fleming and her daughters had

come during the day; but Miss Kettlewell's known dislike to Mrs. Fleming as well as Miss Wedderburn's insulting speeches, had put barriers in the way of her remaining, and at night, therefore, the old lady was usually left to the care of the two nurses and Mrs. Green. As long as the nurses were trustworthy, this arrangement was all right; but Chloe had conceived a dislike and distrust of the younger of the two, the one known as Nurse Ellen.

The other nurse, Sister Mary, was a thoroughly sensible and reliable woman, whom everyone liked and respected. But it was she who had brought Nurse Ellen with her as her assistant, and Chloe had a natural dislike to complaining of the younger woman until she was certain that she had not been mistaken in her doubts. Perhaps they came only from Nurse Ellen's rather sharp and disagreeable manner. Sister Mary was a lady; Nurse Ellen was not. And her rosy underbred face, her twinkling black eyes and immense bush of frizzled black hair, awoke an irritable feeling within Chloe's gentle bosom whenever she saw the girl. Still, as she lay down on her camp bed near the door that led into Miss Kettlewell's hanging-closet and thence into the bed-room, Chloe vowed to herself that she would never condescend to underhand measures again; they were humiliating, and especially if Nurse Ellen were indeed faithful to her trust horribly degrading in their effect upon the mind.

She could not burn a light, lest it should shine through the cracks of the door; but the broad moonlight shone into the room and gave as much illumination as she desired. She took off her dress and wrapped a loose, soft dressing-gown round her; then she awaited the course of events. She knew that she was a light sleeper and would awaken at the slightest sound if she were at all on the alert, so she had no hesitation in sleeping for a little time, and at twelve she would rouse herself and make sure whether the nurse gave Miss Kettlewell the medicine and the nourishment which were ordered at that hour.

But suddenly she awoke from the light slumber into

which she had dropped with an uneasy feeling, and a start. Someone had come into her room. Someone was gliding towards the door which led to the hanging closet and Miss Kettlewell's room. Who could it be?

The moonlight had shifted and left Chloe's couch in darkness. The newcomer had evidently no idea that anyone was in the room. The figure was that of a tall slight woman in black with black drapery over her head—so strangely like that of a nun that Chloe involuntarily recalled the legend of a ghostly novice who was said to haunt the house after being murdered by a wicked abbess when King's Leigh was a convent in pre-Reformation times. The story was old and shadowy, and no one within living memory was reputed to have seen the ghost, but Chloe's mind reverted to it instantly, and she wondered, with a shiver, whether its appearance heralded the approach of death.

Then her senses and her memory came back to her, and she almost laughed. Of course it was Sister Mary gliding through the room on her way to pay a midnight visit to Miss Kettlewell. Chloe felt relieved and yet a little surprised. For had not Mrs. Green impressed upon her that neither of the nurses knew of the concealed entrance to Miss Kettlewell's room? It was for that reason that she had chosen to spend the night in a place whence she could command entrance at her will; for she had a strong suspicion that Nurse Ellen always locked the dressing-room door against visitors at eleven. And yet Sister Mary came that way when she went to make a midnight inspection of the patient and the night nurse.

Chloe did not move. She hoped that Sister Mary would not see her, for she felt rebuked in her own mind for having suspected any want of care. Even if Nurse Ellen was inefficient or unconscientious, no doubt Sister Mary would step in to remedy all defects. So she waited quietly in her dark corner, while the black figure passed her by, pressed the button of the door into the hanging-closet and made her entrance into Miss Kettlewell's room, leaving as Chloe was

quick to notice, the doors behind her just ajar. Nurse Ellen's heavy breathing could then be distinctly heard. As Chloe had surmised, she had made arrangements for her own comfort and fallen fast asleep; there was no appearance of her being ready to wake, for she did not arouse herself even when the elder nurse entered the room; she snored lustily in her armchair, leaving the necessities of her patient to chance.

Chloe listened keenly. She expected to hear the sounds of her awakening, of Sister Mary's severe reproof, of the slight clink of medicine bottle and spoon and glass, which would show that the nurses were complying with the orders given by Dr. Fleming. But she heard nothing at all.

What could Sister Mary be doing? Why did she not wake her assistant? Did she imagine that Nurse Ellen had already attended to Miss Kettlewell's requirements? There seemed a lull, an extraordinary silence in the room, the night-nurse still breathed heavily, but there was no other sound and Chloe's nerves began to feel the strain of the unnatural silence. It seemed to her as though it would be a relief to scream.

What sound was it that came at last? A most unexpected and unaccustomed sound indeed. The turn of a key in a lock; the opening of a drawer—then the rustle of papers, with odd silences between. Chloe drew herself into a sitting position on the edge of her bed and deliberated. She felt that she should very much like to know what Sister Mary was doing. Not that she distrusted her—oh, no, she was sure that Sister Mary was good and honorable and true; but—what was she doing at Cousin Keturah's boxes and chests of drawers? For as it happened, Chloe was familiar with the sound of the clicking key that she had heard. Some sounds stamp themselves upon our memory in such a way that we can recall and recognize them to the last day of our lives; and Chloe distinctly remembered hearing that click as a child, when she stood one day in Cousin Keturah's room, in dire disgrace upon some forgotten count, and when



Cousin Keturah had solemnly unlocked a cedar wood box in her presence and remarked—"Now, my dear, I am going to scratch your name out of my will."

It was a grotesque, almost a farcial incident, for Chloe knew that Miss Kettlewell had only been playing upon her childish fears; but she would remember the click of that key in the lock to her dying day.

What was Sister Mary doing with Miss Kettlewell's cedar-wood box?

Some prescription was missing, perhaps; some paper of instructions; and the nurse thought that it had been placed in one of the drawers, or in the box, that must be the explanation of her actions. Even then, Chloe's indignation began to wax hot within her. No nurse had any business to ransack Cousin Keturah's boxes and chests of drawers. She herself would never have presumed to do such a thing. No, hateful though the errand was, she must present herself in the next room, and arrest Sister Mary's hand.

She rose, gathered her sweeping robe in one hand, so that it should not betray her approach, made her way to the wardrobe, and stood for a moment at the half-open door into the bedroom, surveying the scene.

The fire cast a dull red glow upon the ceiling and the polished furniture. Before it, in a great chintz-covered chair, reclined Nurse Ellen, still soundly asleep. Round the high mahogany four-posted bed, the flowered damask curtains were partially drawn, but Chloe could see the high frilled pillows, and the worn old face upon them, the white sheet on which Miss Kettlewell's thin hand was lying and the satin quilt which rested on the white counterpane. Sister Mary's tall dark figure was bent above an open drawer. A small candlestick was in one of her hands; the lighted candle threw strange flickering shadows of the veiled head about the room as she moved it hither and thither in search of something that she evidently hoped to find. The cedar-wood box seemed to be inside the drawer, and the restless, prying fingers hastily turned over the papers which it con-

tained, pausing now and then, apparently, as if to give their owner an opportunity of considering the nature of some specially interesting document.

Chloe hesitated no longer. She walked swiftly and silently across the room, and laying her hand on the black-sleeved arm, said in a low but distinct voice—

“What are you doing with Miss Kettlewell’s papers, Sister Mary?”

Then she recoiled. It was not the face of Sister Mary that looked at her from under the somber veil. Chloe was not easily frightened, not easily dismayed, but something like a pang of absolute terror passed through her as she looked into the cold blue eyes of Lavinia Wedderburn.

“You!” she exclaimed, her hands dropping to her sides.

Miss Wedderburn said nothing for a minute or two; she too was taken by surprise. She had not suspected that Chloe Fleming was in the house. The muscles of her pale face twitched a little, the thin lips set themselves tighter, but the expression of her eyes did not change. She set the flickering candle down, and looked tentatively at the open drawer. The cedar-wood box was open, and the papers were in disorder. It did not escape Chloe’s notice that one piece of paper was crushed inside the bosom of Lavinia Wedderburn’s dress. Was it one that she had abstracted from the drawer, or was it one that belonged to herself.

“What are you doing here?” said Chloe sternly, but in the low voice which was an essential in Miss Kettlewell’s vicinity. “You are not allowed to come into this room,” the girl said, taking the bull boldly by the horns.

“Allowed!” exclaimed Miss Wedderburn, in her iciest and most disagreeable voice. “I don’t need a chit like you to tell me what I am allowed to do.”

“You are certainly not allowed to search my cousin’s boxes and papers while she is ill, and at midnight too,” said Chloe steadily. “You will shut the drawer and give me the key, if you please.”

Miss Wedderburn uttered a contemptuous laugh. “Do

you think you can make me do what you tell me?" she asked turning to the drawer again, as though she designed to continue her search. But Chloe's hand was instantly laid on her wrist.

"Are you not ashamed?" said the girl. "After you have been here so long, and have been kindly treated for so many years—that you should turn against us all in this way, and ransack my cousin's private drawers and boxes—I am sure I cannot imagine for what reason!—are you not ashamed of it, and of yourself?"

"I am not going to be lectured by a girl," said Miss Wedderburn with perfect calm. "I am only looking for a paper of my own, which I left here by accident. To me it is a most important paper, but I knew that I should never receive it unless I took my own means of doing so. You need not be afraid; I am not going to steal anything from Miss Kettlewell. I am quite in the habit of going to her drawers."

"Yes, in her presence, and at her request," said Chloe. "Miss Wedderburn, unless you go away this moment, I shall wake the nurse and rouse the servants."

"You will have a difficulty in waking the nurse," returned Miss Wedderburn who seemed to have reached the point where recklessness begins. "She has had—something to make her sleep."

Chloe looked at her with wide-open eyes. "You mean you have drugged her!" she cried, in a louder voice. "Oh, you wicked, wicked woman!"

Miss Wedderburn made a sudden movement as if she would have struck her; but it was not often that she completely lost her self-control.

"Take care what you say, Chloe Fleming," she said in a tone of scornful warning, "your fate lies in my hands far more than you imagine. For every insult you heap upon me, I will have my revenge. I have been insulted and trampled upon ever since I came into this house more than ten years ago, and I have always looked forward to some fu-

ture day when I could tell you all what I think of you—how I hate and loathe and despise you! and the day has come at last.”

Chloe drew back a step in absolute horror and dismay.

“What have we done to you,” she said, “that you should speak to me like that?”

“It matters very little what the distinct and separate reasons are,” said Miss Wedderburn calmly. “The fact remains that I hate you all—and if it is ever in my power to do you an injury, Miss Fleming, I shall not hold my hand.”

Chloe would not bandy words any longer. She stepped backward, seized Nurse Ellen by the arm and shook her violently. The woman was in a deep sleep but Chloe’s grasp partially aroused her at last. And then the girl reached across her to the woolen bell-rope that hung beside the mantelpiece and pulled it with all her might. The bell was a loud one, and she could hear it clang vigorously as she pulled and pulled until the rope came away in her hand. But she did not see what Nurse Ellen saw, as the sleep vanished from her heavy eyes. She did not see a weird white figure raise itself slowly in the bed and lift its white-capped head and skeleton-like hands, and try to utter vague words of rage and denunciation and despair. The sight frightened Nurse Ellen more than anything she had ever seen in her life before. For she had looked on Miss Kettlewell as dead.

And here was this paralytic woman, as good as dead, climbing forward on the bed, stretching out one long trembling arm, pointing one shaking finger at the woman who stood beside the drawers, and finding voice at last to cry in a strange, shrill voice—

“Thief! thief! thief!”

Miss Wedderburn shrank back aghast. Chloe looked and saw, and sprang to her cousin’s side. And it was then that Nurse Ellen, losing all control over herself, set up that terrible shriek of terror, that roused every sleeper in the house and bought the doctor, with flying steps, to Miss Kettlewell’s bedroom door.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## IN THE CHAMBER OF DEATH.

Miss Kettlewell's door was locked, as Chloe had divined. She could not leave her cousin to demand the key from Nurse Ellen, she could only cry in answer to her father's welcome voice and imperative knocks—

"Go round—go round. The wardrobe door."

Fortunately Dr. Fleming caught her words, and knew of the other door. It took him only a moment to make his way round, and during that instant Miss Wedderburn had made a frantic effort to escape. He met her at the very door of the room where Chloe had slept, just preparing to fly to the upper rooms. He had wit enough to see that she was concerned in the trouble, whatsoever it might be; and he caught her at once by the arm and compelled her to go back with him to Miss Kettlewell's room. Here a strange sight met his eyes. His daughter was holding in her arms the gaunt white figure of the old woman, who was struggling with her furiously and gasping out threats of punishment against Miss Wedderburn, and vengeance on all the world in general. Chloe was trying to get her back to bed, but it was quite evident that her strength would not be equal to the effort. Dr. Fleming came up to her, and relieved her of her burden.

"Come, come," he said soothingly, "let me help you Keturah. Come, you'll catch cold if you leave your bed like this. I have got Miss Wedderburn safe if you want her." Then, over his shoulder, "Lock the door, Chloe, and don't let Miss Wedderburn leave the room. But you may let in old John and anybody you can trust. Make that woman stop crying if you can."

He alluded to Nurse Ellen, who had succumbed to a fit of hysterical crying, and was beginning to shriek again rather than to sob. Chloe locked the wardrobe-door, and then went into the dressing-room to admit John and Mrs. Green and Sister Mary, who were all gathered anxiously about the door. Miss Wedderburn showed no further intention of making her escape. She stood at the foot of the bed, looking white but perfectly stolid, while Miss Kettlewell, fully restored to sanity and speech, screamed accusations at her from the bed, where Dr. Fleming was firmly and quietly holding her.

"That woman is meddling with my papers! She wants to rob me! She has robbed me all these years. She wants to get at my will! She is a thief! Search her, search her boxes, search her clothes. She has taken something—taken something that is mine!"

"My dear cousin, calm yourself," said Dr. Fleming soothingly. "We will all do our best to keep you safe from her or any other person who will do you harm. Yes, she shall be searched, if you wish it. Yes, yes, we will do all you want. She had no business in your room, certainly; and she will have to answer for it by and by."

He spoke thus to soothe her, but his eye rested sternly on Miss Wedderburn, and read in her face an assurance that she would resist his authority with all the force at her command.

"Send her to prison!" cried the infuriated woman on the bed. "You are all cheating me—robbing me—ill-using me! Why am I left alone with nurses who forget me and sleep all night in their chairs? Why does not Laurence come? I can trust Laurence. I can trust no one else. Send for the police, John, John Driscoll, send for the police, I tell you, unless you want to see your mistress murdered in her bed."

"She is raving," said Miss Wedderburn, with calm contempt to Sister Mary, who now stood beside her with inquiring eyes. Dr. Fleming frowned her into silence, but Miss

Kettlewell had heard the words and now broke forth again with all the spurious strength which vindictive rage could give.

"We shall see if I am raving! Search her, Tom Fleming, search her, if you are an honest man. See what she has in her hand, in her pockets, in her dress. She has robbed me, I tell you—she shall restore what she has stolen before she leaves my house. Give up the paper you have taken, Lavinia Wedderburn, or the police will make you do it."

"If you have taken anything belonging to Miss Kettlewell, you had better restore it at once," said Dr. Fleming.

"I have taken nothing," Lavinia Wedderburn replied.

"You had a paper," said Chloe, coming forward and pointing to the front of her dress. "I saw it there; where is it gone?"

"You are a liar," said Miss Wedderburn. "I have no paper on me at all."

"She had better be searched," said Dr. Fleming quietly, if she will not show us what you saw, Chloe. Sister Mary, Mrs. Green,—Chloe; go with her into the next room, and make sure that she has none of Miss Kettlewell's papers in her possession. Now, Cousin Keturah, we shall get back anything of yours that she may have taken."

But his promise proved vain. Chloe presently returned to say that although they had turned out Miss Wedderburn's pockets, examined her clothes, and in short searched her to the best of their ability, they had not found upon her a paper, or a valuable possession, of any kind.

Dr. Fleming hesitated. It flashed through his mind that these three women were not professional searchers or detectives, and that Miss Wedderburn might have got the better of them still. "Take her to some safe place—not her own room, Mrs. Green," he said, "and lock her in. We will investigate further in the morning."

"Send her to prison!" moaned the old woman from the bed. Her strength was fast leaving her, and her face was changing color. Dr. Fleming looked at her and knew in

his own heart that Keturah Kettlewell's end was nearly come.

After a little hesitation, Mrs. Green suggested a small room at the end of the corridor, where she considered that Miss Wedderburn would be quite safe until morning. And thither Miss Wedderburn was removed, though not before she had thrown a mocking word at Dr. Fleming and Miss Kettlewell.

"You are not so clever as you think yourselves," she said. And, with a vicious glance at Chloe, "I shall be equal with you yet." Then she sullenly moved towards the door, with Sister Mary and Mrs. Green as her warders, one on each side of her. She preserved a perfectly impassive demeanor as long as they were in her company. But they would have been amazed indeed if they could have seen her when she was alone in her prison-room, with the door locked, and no possibility of escape. For here, instead of weeping, or raging, as many another woman—and particularly an innocent woman—would have done; she burst out laughing, and seemed in every way satisfied with her night's work.

"Fine detectives they would make!" she cried, alluding to the nursing sister and the housekeeper. "Why, I should have known better what to do than they seem to have done. 'Turn out your pockets'—oh yes, with all the pleasure in life. 'Take off your dress,' feel the lining, feel me all over if you like. 'Take off your shoes.' Oh yes, shoes; nothing in the shoes, why, where else is there to look?"

She carefully felt her foot, then her hand traveled up her leg as far as the knee. There was scarcely anything unusual to be felt. But it was in her stocking, the bit of blue paper that she wanted to keep; she had just had time to stoop and slip it beneath the fine black hose, before Chloe had turned back from the bell-rope to look at her. And they had never thought of searching her so closely as to find it there. She laughed again as she felt it, and slowly drew it out. It was not a very large bit of paper, and it was thin.



She held it in her hand a minute or two and considered the matter.

"I wish I had a light," she said to herself at last. "It may be not worth keeping. It may be that I am troubling myself for nothing. If I could read it, I would see. But I must wait for morning, and what mayn't happen before then? I think I can even make a safer place for it than this."

Her hands went up to her head. She had thick black hair, fastened up in neat plaits at the back. These she now took down, and carefully unwound in the darkness. Then just as carefully she fastened them up again. But inside the coils of hair, a piece of thin blue paper was artfully concealed. It was easy enough to cover it with her hair. Of course she could not be quite certain that a corner of it was not visible between the thick black braids. She had to risk this, for she possessed no looking-glass and no light. She drew over her head the square of thin black stuff which she had assumed when she wished to personate Sister Mary, and laughed aloud at the success of her plan.

Meanwhile, Dr. Fleming and Chloe watched together at Miss Kettlewell's bedside. The dying woman's fury had died away in moans and gasps and futile tears; at the last she lay quite still, pressing the doctor's hand in one of hers, and holding Chloe by the other. She would not be silent, however, though speech was almost failing her.

"I always liked you, Tom," she said, "and I meant to leave everything to you, if you hadn't married that girl from Surbiton, whom you know I always hated. Oh, well, I won't speak of that. There are your girls, at any rate. Yes, they will have everything—everything, King's Leigh and all. You'll find it all properly arranged. If only nothing goes wrong through that woman—that woman—who tried to rob me, who would have robbed me if you had not come in time!

"You'll find my last Will and Testament in the cedar-box, if she hasn't taken it away. And even if she has, why,

the lawyers have it all safe, you know. They won't let anybody else take the money from your girls, will they?"

"Of course they will not, Keturah, if you have been so good as to make your will in their favor," said the doctor kindly.

She was silent for a moment. It seemed almost as though she were trying to remember something which half escaped her memory.

"I have made a good many wills in my time," she said. "I hope it's all right. I mean your girls to have my money and King's Leigh; you will remember that? Who else is here? Green, and John Driscoll? and that sleepy nurse? Oh, and Sister Mary, as you call her, she's the better of the two. I call you all to witness, good people, that I want my house and my money to go to Chloe Fleming and Millicent Fleming, the daughters of my good cousin here. I have always loved them best, though I may sometimes have seemed unkind, and I want them to have everything I have."

Then her mind seemed to wander a little, and she spoke of other things.

"Frank," she said—and Dr. Fleming remembered that that was the name of the man she was to have wedded once, "Frank, dear, you are rather late. Where have you been? Oh, fishing—down by the marsh ponds. You'll be drowned there some day. I've told you so many a time. Emmeline, is that you? Tell Frank not to go into those dangerous marshy places any more. How changed you both are! Am I changed too? Shall we know each other when we meet?"

Her voice sank in a whispering sigh. She lay quiet for a little time, with a strange look of peace upon her face. When she opened her eyes, her senses had come back to her, and she spoke rationally again.

"Chloe," she said, "I like your young friend Frances. You might do something for her some day. I meant to do something for her myself, but I'm afraid I have forgotten. You'll be good to her, will you not?"

"Of course I will, dear Cousin Keturah."

"She's a good girl. And that isn't all. You should trace out the people she belongs to. Get—Laurence—to tell you. She belongs in some way to the Herons, you may be sure of that. There is something about her—that's unmistakable. Tell Laurence I say so."

"Yes, Cousin, we will tell him."

"Don't forget. Look, she's coming towards me, in her white dress and the pretty flowers in her hand. Don't you see her, Chloe? There, in the middle of the room."

The thin finger tried to point, and then fell on the counterpane. Chloe murmured something caressing; but she could not bear to say that she did not see what, in her dying hour, Keturah Kettlewell saw.

"Is it Frances?" the old woman murmured, in a changed tone, "or is it Emmeline? I scarcely know one from the other now—they are so much alike. You'll remember what I say, Chloe? You will always be good to Frances—for Emmeline's sake."

Greatly wondering, Chloe promised. Neither she nor the other listeners knew whether the dying woman's mind was wandering or not.

"And you must punish Lavinia Wedderburn, unless—unless—If you find it is all right, you can let her go. So long as you and Milly get it all, I don't mind. Only be sure that it is all right; and then you can let Lavinia go. And be good to the animals, good to Jim," said the old lady, with reviving energy. "Don't forget what I tell you Chloe"—with the sharpness that Chloe remembered so well in days of old.

"I will remember all you say, Cousin Keturah."

"That's all right. Now say good-night and go to bed. It's getting late for a child like you. Give my love to Milly, and to Frances and—Frank, Emmeline, are you there? Do you know me still?"

The answer to her questions came to her in another world than ours. Her head fell back upon the pillow. Keturah Kettlewell's long and dreary pilgrimage was done.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## LAVINIA'S HOPE.

With the morning light, Dr. Fleming interviewed Miss Wedderburn again, and, after closely cross-questioning her, thought it better to let her leave the house. Miss Kettlewell had recommended her to mercy, so to speak, and on the whole it seemed to him advisable to make no scandal, especially as he could not discover that she had taken anything of importance from his cousin's room. He warned her, however, that he might still find it necessary to pursue his investigations into her character, and that he should then be obliged to acquaint the police with all that had occurred. At which remark, Miss Wedderburn had the temerity to laugh.

"I am astonished that you can laugh at what I say," Dr. Fleming observed with some sternness. "One would have thought that a person who had lived with my cousin so long would at least have shown some feeling at the news of her death."

"You did not tell me she was dead," said Miss Wedderburn imperturbably. Then, after a moment's pause: "I have no reason to feel sorry that she is dead. My life here has been a bondage. I have stayed for the sake of the salary, and for nothing else."

"There is no reason why we should detain you in the house, then. You are at liberty to go, Miss Wedderburn when you please."

Lavinia looked at him with a dull, cold light in her eyes. "You take the upper hand, Dr. Fleming. Have you no excuse to offer me for the insults to which I was subjected last night? Don't you know that I could take out a summons for assault after being forcibly searched, dragged into

a cold room, and left there all night, falsely accused and brow-beaten?"

"I don't think you would get much by that move," said the doctor quietly. "You were found prying into my aunt's boxes and private drawers. She accused you of taking one of her papers—I fancy you had better let the matter drop: you might get the worst of it."

Possibly Miss Wedderburn thought so too in her heart, for although she sneered, she uttered no further taunts or threats, and, after packing her boxes rather hurriedly, she left the house, metaphorically shaking the dust from her feet as she did so. And those who were left behind her, in charge of the dead, breathed more freely when she was out of the house.

Miss Wedderburn turned her steps deliberately towards Rushton, and to the house of the Reverend Silas Wedderburn. It was still early when she reached it and her quick eye discerned that the servant who was scrubbing the doorstep, wore no cap, and cultivated a bushy fringe. In spite of her preoccupation, Lavinia gave the maid a malevolent glance as she passed by. When she was mistress of that house, as she fully intended to be before very long, no servant of hers should wear a fringe or be seen without a very determinate kind of cap.

"Is your master down yet?" said Miss Wedderburn, addressing the girl stiffly.

The girl had not seen her before, and stared defiantly. "What's that to you, I should like to know?" she muttered, removing her pail and beginning to scrub the lowest step.

"Will you answer me, if you please; I asked if your master was down."

"Of course he ain't; and if he was, he wouldn't see anyone at this time of day."

"I think he will see me," said Lavinia, walking calmly into the house, much to the girl's indignation, "and so I shall wait till he comes down; and you may make me a cup of tea, as I have had no breakfast. And by the bye, my good

girl, you had better put on your cap and make yourself look like a respectable young person before you bring me my tea."

"Well, I never! Of all the impertinence."

"That will do," said Miss Wedderburn frigidly. "You do not know, I perceive, that I am your master's nearest relative, and am coming here to stay," she did not add that she intended to stay for ever, but Jane was quick enough to infer as much. "Kindly bring me the tea as soon as you can, and attend to what I say."

She walked straight into the dining-room as she spoke and Jane retired to the kitchen, to confer with the old woman who filled the post of housekeeper to Mr. Wedderburn. The housekeeper had met Miss Wedderburn before, and cordially disliked her. "There'll be changes in this house before long if so be she's come to stay."

"I shall go for one," said Jane angrily.

"But I wonder what's happened," said Mrs. Telfer. "She was companion to that old Miss Kettlewell of King's Leigh—a rich old heathen, as I've heard say; and she's either been turned away or Miss Kettlewell's dead, if she thinks of staying here. I expect the old lady's dead; she's been very ill and off her head, I've been told. I wonder whether she's left Miss Wedderburn anything."

"Let's hope it will make her a bit more amiable, if she has," said Jane, shrugging her shoulders, and arranging her cap at the looking-glass.

Meanwhile Miss Wedderburn was also at the mirror. There was a long, old-fashioned looking-glass over the mantelpiece, in which she inspected herself critically. A sleepless night, a night of excitement and of fear, has visibly impaired her appearance. Her face looked drawn and haggard, the shadows under her eyes and the worn lines beside her lips added ten years to her age. Her hair was less smooth and glossy than usual, although nothing destroyed its natural wave—so regular that it looked artificial, on either side of her forehead. Her bonnet was tilted a little

on one side; she put it straight. She tied the scarf at her throat afresh, and removed her mantle. When she had had a cup of tea, she would be ready to encounter Silas. She wanted to make a favorable impression upon him, and not to tell him exactly all that she had gone through.

Jane brought the tea with a sulky air, and Miss Wedderburn drank it in a leisurely way. On inquiring, she was told that Mr. Wedderburn seldom came downstairs before ten, and as she declared that she did not wish him to be disturbed on her account, she remained alone for an hour or more.

Shortly before ten, a shuffling noise on the stairs was heard, and Silas entered shortly afterwards, clad in a loose warm dressing gown, with large quilted slippers upon his feet. He looked somewhat ungainly and dingy in this attire, but Miss Wedderburn's cold eyes saw nothing amiss. If Silas had chosen to be affectionate to her, she would have thought him the finest and handsomest man in the world. As it was, he snubbed her a little too often to warrant her in throwing the reins on the neck of her emotions.

"Lavinia!" he said. "You here?"

The tone was not exactly encouraging. But Miss Wedderburn was not one to be easily disheartened.

She said "Yes, Silas," very meekly, and rang the bell for his breakfast.

"How is it that you are here so early—and so unexpectedly?" said the minister.

Lavinia produced her pocket-handkerchief, and proceeded to wipe fictitious tears from her eyes.

"I am sorry to inform you, Silas, that my esteemed friend, Miss Kettlewell, died this morning, between the hours of twelve and one o'clock."

Silas was unfeignedly sorry and said so. He had always felt Miss Kettlewell to be a barrier between himself and Lavinia. Now that the barrier was swept away, what was he to do?

The breakfast dishes—kidneys and bacon—came in at

that moment, with a liberal supply of hot coffee and milk, toast and marmalade. Silas liked a good breakfast. Miss Wedderburn seated herself quite naturally at the head of the table, and poured out his coffee. After all, Mr. Wedderburn reflected, it was very nice to have someone at the table who could relieve you of the trouble of pouring out coffee for yourself.

"Then why have you left so early, my dear Lavinia?" he said. "Do help yourself to coffee."

"Thank you, Silas, I will," said Miss Wedderburn promptly. "And I'll trouble you for a kidney. I have walked over from King's Leigh and had no breakfast. I have left the house so early because the Flemings are now paramount, and the Flemings, Silas, are no friends of mine."

"I'm sorry to hear it. The doctor attends me for nothing," said Silas thoughtfully.

"I shall never be an occasion of dissension between you," said Miss Wedderburn pensively, "I would never permit such a thing. But the fact is, Silas, that the Flemings have long shown a considerable jealousy of me; my position, my friendship with Miss Kettlewell, have caused them to look upon me as an interloper."

"I suppose they think she has left you something. Well, I hope she has, Lavinia; she ought to have made you comfortable for life."

"I doubt it, Silas," said Lavinia. "She may have left me a trifle—but that will be all. I begged her very often not to think of me, 'I have had my salary, an ample salary,' I said to her, 'and I should have been foolish indeed if I had not saved out of that; so do not excite the anger of your relations, my dear Miss Kettlewell, by bequeathing to me anything that might otherwise pass to them.'"

"That was generous of you, Lavinia," said Silas, as he helped himself a second time to kidney and bacon, and then stretched out his hand for the toast, "but I do not know that it was particularly wise."



"Better to be less wise than mercenary," said Miss Wedderburn piously. "I think, however, there are things that I love better than money." And this was perfectly true. For better than money she loved the thought of revenge and the wreaking of her spite on persons who had injured her.

"Well, well, well!" said Silas ponderously, "that is right, of course. But you are a single woman, Lavinia, with small means."

"Yes, indeed, Silas!"

"And you see, I am not a rich man." He spoke rather awkwardly. "My health is very poor. I am not fitted to take new responsibilities upon me."

A flash from Lavinia's pale blue eyes might have enlightened him as to the effect of these words upon her—if only he had seen it. But he did not see it, his eyes were roving restlessly about the room—anywhere, except on her. She sighed and answered with gentle deprecation, dropping her tired lids over the angry tell-tale eyes.

"I would not for the world be an encumbrance, Silas, I only came to ask if you would allow me to stay here for a day or two, until I can get my boxes from King's Leigh and look around me. The Flemings have been most unkind to me," she said sadly. "They told me, as soon as ever the breath was out of poor Miss Kettlewell's body, that they could dispense with my services. They had not dared to turn me away before her death. If I might stay here for a day or two, I would not inconvenience you, and I should then have time to look round for a new situation."

The handkerchief was again called into play at this point, and Miss Wedderburn (with her back to the light) presented to her cousin that spectacle—always touching to unsophisticated man—of a refined female (so Mr. Wedderburn would have said) in distress. His heart was touched a little, especially as he gathered that she did not want to marry him immediately, or even to spend a great length of time in his house.

"Stay, Lavinia my dear, by all means," he said promptly.

"This house is always open to you, as you know. A lonely man—I am proud to think that I can offer you a shelter—for a time."

"You are too good, Silas," said Lavinia, in a subdued tone.

Inwardly she was raging. Had he forgotten that it was an understood thing between them that he was to marry her as soon as she was free? She had waited on at King's Leigh in the hope of a legacy, and was he going to forget the promises that had been exchanged between them? Would he be so base as to back out of his engagement because she had come to him all but penniless? These were the questions which agitated Lavinia Wedderburn's breast; but she was too wary to betray a feeling of this kind.

"I suppose," said Mr. Wedderburn, after devoting a little attention to the marmalade, "that the Flemings will not keep back the money that must be owing to you? Surely a cheque was due—about the time that Miss Kettlewell was taken ill?"

"It was," she said with a sudden flush, "but I do not know—I cannot tell—whether they think of paying it."

She was not thin-skinned; but even she said to herself at that moment that she could not accept money from the hands of those who had insulted her and accused her of being a thief. And was she not a thief after all? By an involuntary movement, she touched the braids of her shining black hair. Ah, the paper was safe, after all. She drew a quick, sobbing sigh.

Silas misinterpreted her emotion. "You must not give way to sentimentality, Lavinia," he said. "It is the bane of our family, I know. I myself—on occasions—have been vanquished by it. Only the sternest sense of duty has succeeded in banishing the specter of foolish sentiment from my heart. You must be brave and uphold your rights."

"I will, Silas," said Miss Wedderburn faintly.

"If not, you must remember that you have a cousin who

will look after them for you. I will write, if necessary, to Dr. Fleming on your behalf."

"You need not do that," said his cousin, with her accustomed primness of demeanor. "I am equal to fighting my own battles, Silas; I am afraid of no man, and shall have not the slightest hesitation in claiming from Dr. Fleming all that I am entitled to."

"That is right—very right, Lavinia," said Mr. Wedderburn. But he looked uncomfortable, and Lavinia saw it.

"No, I am afraid of no man," she repeated with decision. "I am always ready to claim my rights when necessary."

"Yes," said Silas. But there was no enthusiasm in his voice.

Then Lavinia resumed her supple deferential manner.

"How happy I am to be in your dear house," she said, "where I have nothing to demand, where all is conceded to me that I desire—a little friendship, a little affection, a haven from the world. Oh, Silas, if you only knew how like heaven your home appears to me, you would not wonder that instead of shedding tears of grief for my poor dear Miss Kettlewell, I am more inclined to shed tears of joy at the thought of staying here—if only a few short days."

"I shall be delighted to have you here—for a few days, Lavinia," said the minister, in a somewhat constrained and abstracted manner.

"For a few days, yes, Silas dear. And I can be of use to you while I am here. I am sure that Mrs. Telfer cheats you, I can see it in her eye. I wonder you got rid of that nice old woman who was here when I came, to see you last. And that girl, Jane—an impertinent minx! I will look after your household a little while I am here, Silas, and reform it, if I can. You want someone to manage for you, you know, and I will see"—nodding, at him playfully—"what I can do."

The last thing Mr. Wedderburn wanted was someone to manage his affairs, which were just then a little complicated, and he looked ruefully at his cousin. But Miss

Wedderburn only smiled the more effusively, and asked if she should ring for Jane to take the breakfast-things away.

Silas assented and went off to his study for a smoke, while Miss Wedderburn asked placidly to be shown to the best bedroom. And when there, she sat down to think.

"So he means to back out of it now that I am poor, does he?" she said to herself. "But I shall not allow it. I said I was afraid of no man, and I am not afraid of him. I could manage his affairs for him much better than they are managed now. He ought to be glad to confide them to my care. Besides—besides—I may be worth something to him yet."

Then she took off her bonnet and her dress, and let down the coils of her black hair. And twisted into the last thick coil, there was the paper that contained the latest Will and Testament of Keturah Kettlewell.

Lavinia Wedderburn smiled at it triumphantly, before she hid it away.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## FATHER AND SON.

Matthew Derrick the miller lived no longer in the house beside the mill where he had lived in the days of his early married life. When he had amassed a competency—more than a competency, some people said—he built himself an ugly square brick house in a new and spiky garden, furnished the house with the brightest colors that he could find, and felt himself proud and happy. His wife for whom the house had been built, never seemed to flourish in it, precisely. She missed the coming and goings of the humble home, the tramp of feet beside it, the murmur of the river, the whirr of the mill. She lived an ailing life in the new house for three or four years, and then she died, leaving behind her the son for whom his parents had done all they could to make him “a gentleman.”

They were not gentlefolk themselves. They had no trace of good breeding or ancestry about them. They had been working-people for generations, with a certain sturdiness of intellect perhaps, and an unfailing rectitude of life which had compelled the respect of all who knew the Derrick family. If they were proud at all, they were proud of their honesty, of their domestic piety, of their respectability—of all the commonplace virtues which are supposed to flourish chiefly among the bourgeoisie. And until Matthew Derrick's time, they had not known the temptation of wealth. But Matthew had “made money,” and had resolved that his son should be a gentleman.

There was nothing in Andrew to bar the way. He was quite good-looking, good tempered, studious at times, yet not averse from active exercise; he had

borne himself very well so far in every relation of life. At Oxford, indeed, he had done more—he had shown absolute brilliancy, and had gained high honors; but these had left him, with some disgust at the easiness of his success. He did not quite know what to do with his life as yet. He lacked an interest—an object. His father wanted him to embark on the stormy career of politics; Andrew, with a sense that he was not cut out to be a politician, would rather have buried himself in his books. The father did not argue, did not try to press his point home; but Andrew was quite conscious of what lay on his mind.

Old Mr. Derrick was a fine-looking man in his way; his snow-white beard and hair gave dignity to a rugged face, and his fine dark eyes were full of energy and power. "The old lion," Andrew had dubbed him in a playful moment, and there was indeed some sort of likeness to the monarch of the forest, deriving itself perhaps from the untamableness of his glance, the thickness of his white mane of hair. He sat one afternoon in a room which he was pleased to call his study—though there was little sign of study about it, save a big desk, and a few books of reference in shelves—and here, as he deliberately smoked his pipe, he was joined by Andrew his son.

The two men did not exchange any greeting. Matthew Derrick continued to puff out great clouds of smoke. He was sitting in a big armchair, with his feet on the fender; for he had a touch of rheumatism and the day was cold. Andrew, who had a band of crape on his coat sleeve, dragged forward a Windsor chair, and sat astride upon it, his arms resting on the back, and his chin upon his arm. There they sat for some time, without speaking; it was their idea of companionship.

"Smoke?" said old Derrick at last.

"No," said Andrew, shaking his head.

Then they were silent for a good while, both gazing into the embers of the fire. Once Mr. Derrick stirred uneasily and glanced at his son as if to ask a question; but Andrew

did not move, did not look, and his father withdrew his eyes and kept silence.

At last the son lifted his head, and drew himself up.

"Well, we've buried her," he said.

"Ah. Sorry I could not go myself. Many people at the funeral?"

"Poor old woman, yes. A great crowd. Heaven knows what they care for, unless it was to stare at—the relations."

Matthew Derrick noted the pause before the word. "What relations were present?" he asked cautiously.

"Oh, Mr. Corbet, of course. And his ward, by the way—though she is not a relation, I believe. It is the fashion for women to go to funerals nowadays." Andrew's voice was grim. He did not often like the fashions of the day. "Dr. Fleming was there, and his wife. Oh, and his daughters of course." He pretended to speak indifferently. His father smoked and said nothing.

"What a humbug it all is!" exclaimed Andrew, getting up from his chair, and strolling round restlessly. "Here's an enormous crowd of people assisting at the obsequies of a woman whom nobody knew and nobody liked, and who had lived like a hermit for a couple of generations. If she had been a poor woman, nobody would have cared whether she lived or died. Because she was rich, there is all this to-do. Yet I am sure that nobody cared for her."

"The Hernesdales—were they present?"

"Yes. The Earl, and his son."

"That was the proper thing. Of course you know she would ha' been Countess if she had lived. Engaged to Frank, the last Earl but one; he got himself drowned one winter down at the marsh-ponds. The Hernesdales always professed a mighty consideration for her."

"Poor old woman!" said Andrew, in rather a softened tone. But he still continued his pergrinations up and down the room. "I saw that woman who used to be her companion—what's her name, Wedderburn? Cousin of your minister, dad. She was looking on with a queer sort

of expression upon her face; not sorrowful, I should say. Yet she had lived with the old lady for more than ten years."

"There's few old folk that have any to mourn for them," said Derrick.

"Their own fault, then."

"Na—na. Some day Andrew, thou'lt be wanting the old man out o' the way."

"May I perish first," said Andrew, hotly and hastily. "Life won't ever seem the same to me without the old man waiting by the fire, for me to bring him home the news."

"Ay, ay! And what news is there to-day, Andrew?"

The old man put down his pipe and looked at his son curiously.

"Nothing new," said Andrew curtly.

"What, did you hear nothing about Miss Kettlewell's will?"

"Oh, yes. I waited to hear that piece of news. She has left everything as she said she would."

"To the Flemings? Everything to those bits of girls. It seems a waste, does it not?" said the father craftily. "A woman is no good at managing property. It takes a man. They'll have to marry someone who is good at business and can look after their affairs."

"A sort of bailiff or steward," said Andrew bitterly. Then, after a short pause: "Nay, they're more likely to marry men with titles, men who think little even of such a fortune as they can bring. Lord Heron is already spoken of for one of them; it will not be long before we hear of a match for Chloe, too."

The name slipped out unawares. Matthew Derrick replaced his pipe in his mouth and smoked meditatively. Andrew walked up and down the room.

"It isn't a title that brings happiness," said the father at last, with the air of a man who has discovered a novel truth.



Andrew laughed. "It is supposed to bring a good deal of satisfaction to a woman's heart," he said.

"Not if she's a good woman. Not if she's a woman like your mother, Andrew. And I always thought Chloe Fleming a good woman and a true one, as well as a pretty girl with a soft spot in her heart for a good man and an old friend, like yourself, Andrew."

"It's no use; don't talk like that, dad," and the young man's voice shook, in spite of his affectation of cheerfulness.

"Has she refused thee, Andrew, lad?"

"I haven't asked her, I'm glad to say."

"Eh?"

"Do you think I could ask her to be my wife when she's one of the richest women of the country-side?"

"I don't see why not," said old Derrick, reflectively. "I'd have asked your mother to marry me, if she'd had a million a year."

"I can't do that," said Andrew, marching up and down the room again.

Presently he came to a standstill, opposite his father, and looked at him with the odd mixture of embarrassment and affection, which old Derrick used to know, in his son's boyish days, as the preface to a confession or a request.

"Speak up, lad," he said, with the glimmer of a smile.

"Dad, I wish it was anything else I wanted to say to you."

"Out with it, then! Waiting doesn't make things any better. What dost want?"

"I want to go away for a few months, dad. I should like to go round the world, I think. You see I must do something. I can't bear to stay here and—look on."

"You think she has no care for you, then, Andrew, my lad?"

"I—I can't think it now. If she has, it will be frowned down as a fancy beneath her station; and I'll never marry a woman who thinks herself above me."

"Chloe wouldn't think herself above thee, lad!"

"But other people would. And it makes me mad," said the young man, in a tone of desperate irritation. "Why on earth could not Miss Kettlewell leave her money to Laurence Corbet? The Flemings don't want it—they are well enough off—"

Derrick could not forbear a laugh. "Fleming works hard for his living," he said. "And Corbet's got plenty of his own. No, I don't think the worse of her for that."

"At any rate," said Andrew, "it sets up a barrier between her and me which I cannot be the one to surmount."

"You don't expect her to surmount it then, do you?"

"She does not care for me, father. The best thing I can do is to go away, and give her time to forget that she once thought—she may have thought—that I loved her."

"Better to stay and get it over here, my boy."

"I can't, father."

And he turned such a look of trouble upon his father that Matthew Derrick actually put down his pipe and held out his hand.

"I'll do all in my power to help ye, my lad," he said, as Andrew wrung his hand affectionately.

"I know you will, dad. But I've made up my mind to get out of this for a time. I can't stand it. So I might as well go and see the world a bit."

"I think you're wrong, you know, Andrew. I'd ask the lass to marry me at all events."

"Not with all those thousands a year at her back, dad. I couldn't bear it. I'll be no woman's lackey, not even Chloe's, though I love her—better than my life."

"But not better than thy pride," said Mr. Derrick shrewdly. And although Andrew protested to the contrary, he hung his head, as one that knew himself to be blameworthy. After a few moment's reflection, however, he raised it proudly, with the observation.

"It's better for me to go. I should eat my heart out if I stayed here, watching her conquests."

And there was so much bitterness in his tone that Mr. Derrick forebore to argue the question further. In truth, he sympathized with his son far more than he would have allowed. It would have been an almost unbearable wound to his pride if he had married a woman richer than himself, and he would scarcely have liked to see his son doing it. In fact, had Andrew married Chloe, the father would very possibly have irritated his son to madness by throwing out gibes concerning the position of a man who weds a woman much richer than himself. There would have been a quarrel between them as soon as the engagement was announced.

Having so much of the same fiber in them, therefore, Matthew Derrick did not oppose his son's project. He had never been abroad himself, but he thought it was right for every gentleman to go. So he equipped his son handsomely, gave him as big an allowance as he could afford, and told him to go and enjoy himself.

"And bring me home a daughter-in-law," he said, "only not a brown one, if you please."

"Not one at all," said Andrew. "I shall be an old bachelor, and shall come and smoke my pipe with you here before very long, dad. Only, for a little while, I feel as if it might be better for me to get away."

"Well, may be it is, maybe it is," said the old man, hesitatingly. Then, with a sudden softening of his rough voice: "Don't be too long away, lad. I'm not so young as I was, and I—I shall miss you sorely."

Andrew was touched and grieved. "I never thought you'd mind, dad," he said wistfully. "You've let me go away before—to Oxford—"

"Yes, but I thought you'd be back soon each time you went away. I've often counted the days to your homecoming, Andy. And this time I thought you were settling down, and would make a home of the old place. But you will do it by and by; I'm sure of that."

"I'll bring myself home, that is all I can promise," said Andrew.

"Well, that will be enough for me. I'll just look forward to it, till you come. And mind, you needn't hurry yourself on my account. If you do go, you might as well see things properly. You can tell me what you've seen in the evenings when you come home again."

"The long evenings when we start our bachelor life together," said Andrew cheerfully. But he did not feel so very cheerful after all.

## CHAPTER XIX.

## AS REGARDS FRANCES.

As Andrew Derrick had told his father, Miss Kettlewell, by her will left her possessions to Chloe and Millicent Fleming, to be divided equally between them. She bequeathed a few legacies of no great importance to a few friends and to her servants; also, to the surprise of a good many people, there was an annuity to Miss Wedderburn. Nobody had expected her to leave anything to the woman whom she had alternately patronized and browbeaten for so many years; but as several people remarked it showed that, vulgarly speaking, Miss Kettlewell's bark had been worse than her bite.

Miss Kettlewell had also made a condition that the Flemings should leave Rushton and inhabit King's Leigh as long as either of the girls was under age. When Milly was twenty-one another arrangement could be made; and there were elaborate instructions concerning the future ownership of the beautiful old house which was to belong to that one of the sisters who married last, while the one first married, was to receive a very large sum of money out of the estate as compensation for her loss. It was a curious and complicated will, but perfectly valid and in order, giving no reason to any person to say that it had been dictated by a woman of unsound mind. Of course, as one or two people observed, if the contents of the will had been distasteful, either to the Flemings or to Miss Kettlewell's nearest relative, Laurence Corbet, it would have been fairly easy to upset it on the ground of Miss Kettlewell's eccentricities and abnormal behavior during the last months of her life; for the will had been drawn up only in June—the June of the year in which she died. But everybody was

well satisfied, and the will was duly proved and carried into execution; and the Flemings prepared to remove from Rushton to King's Leigh.

To this removal, however, Mrs. Fleming strongly objected. She said she would willingly do all she could for the welfare of their girls; but she thought it rather unnecessary that the whole household should be transported to King's Leigh for the next two years. "It may be less than two years," she said to her husband, "the girls might marry before then—and we might have to turn out. I will never consent, Tom, to live in the house of a married daughter, and be considered the proverbial mother-in-law."

"I don't think your sons-in-law will fall out with you, Margaret."

"Perhaps not; but we should have to come back to Rushton again if our daughters married," she persisted with some warmth. "And it seems to me a pity that we should give up this house entirely. What will become of your practice, Tom?"

"Oh, that will be all right," said Dr. Fleming, with a laugh. "You don't suppose I am going to live on my daughters, do you Maggie? We will keep this house on, and let Gurney—" Gurney was his assistant—"have a room or two here; and I'll keep a room for myself too; it will always be convenient for you when you want to come into Rushton, and you need not remove all your stores and your treasures. They will all be here when you want to come back to it."

Mrs. Fleming's eyes brightened. The plan seemed practical and feasible. It had seemed to her a veritable tempting of Providence to give up the homely, comfortable house that had been their home for so many happy years, where Chloe and Milly had been born and where a beautiful baby-boy had died, to give it up and off to the lofty splendors of King's Leigh for two or three years at most!—to Margaret Fleming it had seemed a thing impossible. She

loved the plain red-brick house in the common street far better than the park and the terrace at King's Leigh. And to make these changes at the bidding of Miss Kettlewell, a woman who had scorned her and belittled her and insulted her ever since her marriage day! No, she could not do it, though she did not say so to Chloe and Millicent, who hung round her with fond anticipation of the pleasure and the glory that it would be to them to have their mother "doing the honors" of King's Leigh.

"But that is all nonsense; I shall not do the honors," said Mrs. Fleming with her quiet serene smile. "You are the ladies of the house, you two; you must take it in turns to entertain and to sit at the head of the table; I shall be one of your guests."

There was a great outcry. "As if we should allow any such thing!" cried Milly. "No, you are our own little mother, and never a visitor! It is your home as well as ours; you shall be queen there as much as you are here."

"It would be no home to us if you were not in it, mother," Chloe said; and Margaret's eyes filled with glad and grateful tears as she realized that she was indeed beloved by her daughters even more than is usual with mothers. The contrast between their lives and that of their friend Frances was impressed with double force upon her mind as she turned and met the eyes of their visitor fixed full upon her, with a troubled look in them that went to Mrs. Fleming's heart. Frances had driven over to congratulate her friends on their good fortune and to spend the day. It was thus that she had been present during the discussion about the mistress-ship of King's Leigh.

Margaret divined all that was passing in Frances's heart. She knew that it hurt the girl to see the caresses lavished on the mother by the daughters, that it smote her like a blow when Chloe said that King's Leigh would be no home to her without a mother. Such pangs as these a lonely girl is bound to feel; but there was no bitterness in Frances's pain. It only came home to her now and then that she had no near and

dear relations in the world; that even her guardian could not supply the place of the mother who was dead, the father who had abandoned her in the hour of need; and at these moments she was sorrowful. Mrs. Fleming read the sorrow in her eyes, and went up to her and kissed her afterwards.

"You must come and see us very often at King's Leigh," said Chloe, quick to read her mother's meaning, and to offer balm to the wounded heart. "We shall treat you as one of ourselves, and you will come and go just as you like—it will be another home to you as well as Denstone."

"It is nearer to Denstone, than to the town," said Milly with great satisfaction. "You can come in quite easily; you'll not even need the carriage. What fun we shall have!"

"Remember your poor Cousin Keturah, dear," said Mrs. Fleming gently. "Be grateful to her while you are happy in what she has given you."

"Now isn't that sweet of mother?" exclaimed Milly, when Margaret had moved away. "For Cousin Keturah always hated her and used to say horrid things about her, even to us, when we were too young to prevent her. And now she tells us to be grateful to her!"

"Was Miss Kettlewell not friendly with your mother, then?" asked Frances in surprise.

"No, indeed; she scarcely ever spoke to her. She looked down on mother's family," said Milly, with great candor. "which was absurd because mother's family was just as good as hers, only Cousin Keturah happened to be rich and had once been engaged to a lord. But mother is so sweet that she would never let us say a word against Cousin Keturah—and of course, poor old thing, I don't want to, especially now she is dead and has been so good to us. And it is not nice to talk against one's own relations, is it?"

"But suppose one's relations were to be really bad? or at least such as one could not respect?" said Frances, with a suppressed vehemence which Milly failed to notice, and



Chloe to understand. "What would you do then? Suppose you could only speak well of them by telling lies!"

"Oh, that would be dreadful!" cried thoughtless Milly. While Chloe more quietly observed—

"One would have to consider the claim of loyalty and the claim of one's own desire to keep clear of wrongdoing," she said.

"Ah, that is so difficult," sighed Frances. Chloe did not understand, but concluded that there was some story in Frances's mind which she did not care to discuss. Of course there was a mystery about Frances—everyone knew that. But Chloe and Millicent were careful to ask no questions. They had always carefully avoided the subject of their friend's early history. If Frances wanted to tell them anything, they would be glad to hear it; if not, they would let it alone.

But Mrs. Fleming, and Chloe also, were both conscious of the shadow that was visible in Frances's beautiful eyes from time to time; they thought her more silent than usual, with a kind of pathetic appeal in her face which was a mystery to them. What had gone wrong with her? Something there must be; but Frances was not a girl whose confidence it was very easy to win.

She was in reality undergoing a severe ordeal. Chloe and Milly had told her the whole story of Miss Wedderburn's behavior during Miss Kettlewell's illness and at the time of her death; and they had not spared Miss Wedderburn. Frances, knowing that Lavinia was her father's cousin and bore the same name as herself, felt her face burn when she was told of Miss Wedderburn's insolence, ingratitude and possible dishonesty. She shivered when she heard how Chloe had stood by and seen the woman's pockets turned inside out and felt her clothes and examined her shoes. But this was told by Milly, below her breath; for Dr. Fleming had felt a little ashamed of the course he had taken and did not like it talked about; but Frances, little by little, heard it all.

She had never liked her cousin Lavinia, for she still remembered instances of that lady's tyranny over her mother, whom Silas only half defended and protected; but she had a strong sense of Lavinia's technical honesty, as it might be called; for she did not believe that Miss Wedderburn would secrete a piece of jewelry or try to appropriate her employer's coin, or papers that would be valuable to herself. So when Milly whispered that old Miss Kettlewell had shrieked "Thief! thief! thief!" at Lavinia from her dying bed, Frances had turned sick and pale with disgust, and hastily bade Milly to tell her nothing more.

She had formed a project, which now seemed next door to impossible. She had come to the Fleming's house, meaning to tell Mrs. Fleming, and perhaps Chloe, of her relationship to Silas Wedderburn, and to ask them to help her in seeing him once again. She had thought of revealing herself to him, and of asking whether there were any way in which she might be of use to him. But now she felt that she could not say a word about it to the Flemings. Tell them that she was the kinswoman of this Lavinia Wedderburn whom they were accusing, justly or unjustly, of meanness and ingratitude, to say the least? She could not do it; she must stand alone. And very much alone she felt just then.

Since Laurence's ill-timed proposal of marriage, she had felt herself in some way cut off from him. He had been very kind to her, very anxious that she should be happy; but she had lost the old sense of trust in his presence, of confidence in his plan of life for her. And she liked less than ever to confess to him that she had moments of yearning for her father, in spite of the fact that he had behaved so cruelly to her; that she wanted to "belong" somewhere, to have a recognized place among people of her own class, and not to feel herself a waif and stranger.

"I would not have minded being poor," she said to herself. "I could have lived in that queer little red house of my father's quite happily I am sure; I should have done ex-

cellently for a poor man's daughter. If I had known nothing else, I should have been quite content with chapel and sewing meetings and tea-meetings—all that my mother went through before me. I don't care for big parties and dances and theaters one bit. If only I had somebody to care for me, as Chloe and Milly have!"—and a few tears fell silently down Frances's cheeks, as she was driven back to Denstone in the brougham that evening after dinner. "But to get up and say before them all, 'I am the cousin of the woman whom you despise; and my father is the man who was called a coward, for saving his own "valuable" life instead of that of his own child!'—that would be terrible; that would be a degradation, which I don't think I could endure.

"And yet," said the girl, with a great swelling of heart, "if my father needed me, I should be glad to go to him, whether he were rich or poor, bad or good. I never heard that a child should renounce its parents because they were not immaculate. It seems to me an odd way of honoring one's father and mother. But what can I do?"

Her eyes traveled wistfully over the dark expanse of country through which the carriage was bearing her; but she found no answer to her question in the darkness through which she gazed. And presently she was standing in the drawing-room at Denstone, smilingly replying to Laurence's remarks, and answering Mrs. Lester's questions with the best grace in the world. It needed Mrs. Fleming's motherly eye to see that anything was amiss.

"I am sure that Frances is out of spirits," she said that evening to her daughter Chloe. "We must think what we can do for her."

"It cannot be very lively for her at Denstone, I wonder whether Mr. Corbet would let her come to us for a time, to stay?"

"It would not be a bad idea. You must ask him," said the mother.

Inwardly she wondered whether Frances were not en-

grossed by some secret love-affair, of which the world knew nothing; and she ventured one day to sound Laurence Corbet on the subject. She thought that she said nothing to offend; but to her surprise, Laurence immediately grew very red, and seemed decidedly annoyed.

"You do not imagine that Frances would do anything underhand, I suppose," he said, a trifle haughtily.

"Underhand! oh, dear, no. I thought you would know all about it, and that you could explain—"

"Explain! what is there to explain? Has she said anything to you?"

"Not a word. My dear Laurence, don't look so angry! I was only trying to account in my own mind for her depression—"

"Is she depressed?"

"Her depression is unmistakable; and her health is suffering. She looks pale, and she has constant headaches."

"She never mentioned them to me."

"Ah, that is where the poor girl misses a mother's care," said Mrs. Fleming. "You had better let her come and stay with us for a little while; I will look after her, and Tom will give her a tonic."

"A tonic for Frances! Why, she was always the brightest, healthiest creature—"

"She is not bright just now," said Mrs. Fleming, significantly; and Laurence was obliged to admit to himself that he had not heard Frank's gay laugh of late, and that her face had been paler, her step more languid than of yore.

"If she likes to come," he said harshly, "I would not prevent her for the world. You would take good care of her, I know. Perhaps I have not been a fit guardian for her," he added gloomily. "I don't know how to deal with women—Frances is a woman now."

"And a very beautiful one," said Mrs. Fleming, trying to make him more cheerful. "You will soon have to think about her dowry, Laurence, and interview her suitors—"

"Oh, I've done that several times already," said Mr. Cor-

bet, with great grimness of demeanor, "and I promise you they do not want to come a second time." Then, under his breath, "Confound them!"

"My dear Laurence," said Mrs. Fleming, rather shocked by the muttered ejaculation, "do you not want her to marry?"

"Oh, yes, I want her to marry," said Laurence, sitting down, and defiantly sticking both hands into his pockets. "But you see, we don't agree about the person—"

"Ah! I knew there was something of the kind. She wants to marry some one of whom you do not approve?"

"Not altogether. No; I can't find out that she wants to marry anybody. It's the other way round."

"What! that you want her to marry some one whom she does not care for? Oh, Laurence! I should never have imagined that you would be so unkind."

"I am not unkind," he said, in a tone of considerable irritation. "I assure you, I do not worry her about it. The fact is this, Margaret,—I might as well tell you and then perhaps you will be able to help me a little—at least, if you choose:—the fact is as regards Frances that I—I want her to marry me."

Mrs. Fleming scarcely knew whether she could believe her ears.

## CHAPTER XX.

### LOVING AND LEAVING.

Dr. Fleming brought home the news that Andrew Derrick was going abroad. He announced it at luncheon, and added some words of admiration for Andrew's father—"the most sensible man I know," he said. He did not notice that Mrs. Fleming had furtively glanced at Chloe, and that Chloe's cheek was pale.

"Why sensible?" she asked, putting in a word to spare her daughter the necessity of any remark.

"Well, old Derrick's not a man of any education himself," said the doctor, cheerfully. "And yet he never grudges Andrew any advantages. Some men would have objected to his leaving England directly his Oxford life was over; but Derrick seems to think it quite natural and right. A fine old fellow! I hope Andrew will be worthy of his father."

"But why should Andrew go abroad?" said Milly, enquiringly. "Has he any object in view? Because—if he hasn't and if he is only going to amuse himself, I think it is very selfish of him."

"We cannot possibly judge, Milly, when we know so little of the circumstances," said Chloe, lifting her eyes, and speaking with a faint touch of color in her cheek.

"Milly is too hasty," said Mrs. Fleming, with gentleness. "I hope Andrew will have a pleasant time. Chloe, dear, when are you going to invite Frances Corbet to stay with you?"

Thus she glided away from a subject which she felt instinctively to be rather dangerous. Chloe had not said a word to her on the subject of Andrew's attentions to her, but the mother's eye had distinguished them, and was not

altogether sorry that the young man was removing himself from the scene of temptation.

Andrew Derrick was all very well—a clever young fellow, and the son of a much respected and successful man; but not the sort of son-in-law whom Mrs. Fleming thought quite suitable. She was not an ambitious woman, but she would have been more than mortal if she had not hoped that Chloe would some day make a good, even a “great” marriage and blossom out into one of the great ladies of the land. She was beautiful enough for anything, her mother thought, looking at the tall, graceful figure, the shining waves of fair hair, the rose-leaf complexion and down-dropped, long-lashed gray eyes. Milly was pretty enough; but Milly was only pretty: she was piquante and attractive and amusing, but not beautiful, like Chloe. Milly, Mrs. Fleming thought, would have suited Andrew very well; but Chloe ought to marry a man of higher social position than the Rushton miller’s son.

Yes, it was much better that Andrew should go away. So Mrs. Fleming thought when she came across her elder daughter standing beside a passage window, with a white face, and eyes that looked dreamily across the green meadows to the red roof of Derrick’s mill. She would not question Chloe, she knew quite well that it was Andrew of whom Chloe thought. She did her best to keep Chloe well occupied and as near herself as possible, but she could not prevent an accidental encounter, and the few minutes’ conversation that the young people had together in the road between Rushton and King’s Leigh did not tend to make things easier for either of them.

Chloe was walking over to King’s Leigh, where a good deal of alteration in furniture and household arrangement was necessary before the Flemings could come in. And Andrew—there was no particular reason why he should be upon that road at all; but perhaps it was because he hoped to meet some of his old friends there. It was a shady road in summer, with pleasant glimpses of green fields on either

side; but in late autumn, verging upon winter, when the leaves had almost all fallen from the branches, and the fields were damp, there was an impression of gloom about the scene which was far from being cheerful.

Chloe, in mourning for her cousin, was not a particularly brilliant object in herself, but to Andrew it appeared as though she lighted up the whole landscape like a sun. They came face to face and shook hands, rather hurriedly and timidly, and then they made a series of conventional remarks upon the weather; at the end of which, Andrew Derrick said abruptly:

"You have heard I am going abroad, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Chloe, looking away.

"Ah, she won't even say she is sorry I am going," groaned Andrew to himself. Then, aloud, "It will be a good while before I come back. You will be settled at King's Leigh by that time."

"I suppose so. You will come and tell us all about your adventures when you get back, will you not?" said Chloe, with a smile in which there was no heart.

"I think I may be years away," he answered.

There was a little pause and then Chloe said softly:

"Isn't it rather hard on your father that you should be away so long?"

"You mean I am selfish," said Andrew, turning upon her.

"No. I do not know why you are going. You have your reasons, I daresay."

"Very good reasons," said Andrew, who was turning a little white about the nose and mouth, as some men do when their feelings are aroused. "I go because I want to keep my independence—I can't trust myself if I stay. I shall do—what an honorable man would not do, unless I go quite away; and it is for that reason that my dear father does not object."

"But you must come back some time?" said Chloe, a red flush rising to her cheeks.



"Yes, when the danger is over."

"But—when—?"

"When will that be? Do you need me to tell you?" he said, looking doggedly into her face. "When you are married; not before. I wish to God," he said, looking aside and speaking with fierce emphasis, "that Miss Kettlewell had left her money to anyone but you."

"I am what I always was; money makes no difference," said Chloe, with an effort that brought the blood in a rush to her sweet face. In saying it, she almost felt as though she had offered herself to him, and she trembled from head to foot. But the words did not convey so much to Andrew's mind as they had meant to her.

"You are the same, oh yes; I know you could not be changed," he said hotly, "but you are above me; you are out of my sphere. It is better for us to be strangers."

Chloe's slumbering pride arose. "As you please," she said, quietly, and her voice sounded very cold.

"I shall never forget you," Andrew blundered on. "But the best thing I can do for you now is to keep out of your way. Only—if at any time you should want me; if you are in trouble, if you should ever be poor again—but how can you be poor?—you have only to send a word to me and I shall be at your side."

Chloe wished that she dared venture to say, "I want you now." But it was too much to expect of a girl brought up as she had been—with all the refinement and maidenliness of a bygone generation, and no taint of the New Woman in her composition at all. She stood silent, with crimson cheeks and drooping eyelashes, and Andrew never guessed how wildly her pulses were leaping, nor how near she came at that moment to throwing herself upon his breast and begging him to stay.

"I must say good-bye," he said, suddenly. "Oh, why were you made rich?" he cried, in the bitterness of his heart; and then he turned and went down the road towards Rushton, without further leave-taking; and Chloe pro-

ceeded on her way to King's Leigh, with slow, miserable tears dropping down her cheeks.

Now it was all over, she supposed. Andrew was gone and would never come back again—until she married. And she should never marry. She should care for no one except Andrew; and if he would not marry her because she was rich, she had it in her heart to give up all her wealth and live humbly and snugly until he came back to ask her to become his wife. But the tears flowed faster as she realized the impossibility of this state of things. No, he was gone, and she must make the best of it; but oh, how she hated those unwelcome riches that had parted her from the only man she could have loved!

A few days later, she came across old Mr. Derrick in the street. Hitherto he had always had a smile and a kindly word for her; but now he only grunted when she said "Good morning," and tried to pass her by. Some secret influence prompted her to detain him.

"How are you, Mr. Derrick? Are we not having fine weather for the time of year?" she said, offering him her hand.

He took it and let it go, then said, half sullenly.

"Ah, it's you, is it, Miss Chloe? Not forgotten me in your new grandeur?"

"Why should I forget anybody whom I care for?" said Chloe, looking more pathetic than she knew, with the tears in her violet-gray eyes.

"Ah, well! Riches make a difference."

"Not to me. Oh, Mr. Derrick, believe it; not to me."

The white-bearded, white-haired man glanced at her, and noted the quivering lips. He thought to himself that Andrew had been too hasty in his departure.

"You know I'm all alone now," he said, his voice softening a little. "My son has left me."

"I know. I am very sorry."

"Are you, my girl?" he said, with sudden sharpness. "Then you'd better get him back."

And concluding with something which sounded very like a snarl, the old man tramped away, leaving Chloe with the tears in her eyes and a strange, choking sensation in her throat.

How could she get Andrew back? It was impossible—and the father knew it, too. She was almost indignant at the way in which they treated her. Had she not gone as far as she possibly could in the way of hinting her regard for him, her desire that he would stay? Was it not an absolute impossibility for her to do anything more?

She made up her mind not to think of Andrew any longer. But her pleasure in King's Leigh was absolutely spoiled. She made her preparations for the new life with a curious absence of pleasurable emotion, and turned away without replying when Milly uttered jubilant exclamations of delight.

Milly's star was in the ascendant. The Hernesdales made much of her, and it was evident to everyone that "Charlie," otherwise Lord Heron, was wildly in love with her. Indeed he went so far as to begin to lay his proposals before Dr. Fleming; but Dr. Fleming cut him short at once. Milly? Why Milly was a child; he wouldn't have her mind disturbed; Lord Heron must wait until she was twenty-one. What for? Oh, because it was better that she should see a little of the world and know her own mind—

"I think she knows it now," said Heron, with a burst of the sunniest laughter in the world; and then Dr. Fleming was rather angry and affronted, for no man likes to think that he is going to be robbed of his youngest child before she is out of her teens. It ended in an "understanding," which was not to be called an "engagement," but which came to much the same thing, for the two young people were constantly together, and everyone knew that Milly was the future Countess of Hernesdale. "See what money does!" reflected Chloe with considerable bitterness, when she paced the long terrace, and thought of the long lonely

years before her, where she at King's Leigh might grow into a second Miss Kettlewell. "All because I am rich," she said to herself, forgetting to add—"All because Andrew is too proud to marry a woman richer than himself."

But although Andrew was proud, and although he was far away, he did not fail to ask his father for full accounts of Chloe's doings, and for descriptions whenever he had seen her, of her appearance and of the scene in which they had met. And old Derrick did his best to satisfy his son's unreasonable desires—for so they seemed to him—and to give him as much hope as possible. But since Chloe could not denude herself of her wealth, and Andrew would not marry her while she was rich, there seemed at present no chance of their coming to an understanding.

Meanwhile, there was one silent watcher of the Flemings and their friends, of whom the Derricks took no count. They had seen and heard of Miss Wedderburn as Miss Kettlewell's companion; they had been told of the annuity that she had inherited, and of the rude and unfriendly way in which she had behaved to the Flemings, but they knew no more. The scene which took place during the last few minutes of Miss Kettlewell's life had not been made public; Rushton, in general, had no idea that after ten years' faithful service Miss Wedderburn had been dismissed in disgrace. Neither had Silas Wedderburn, exactly, although he surmised something amiss.

Miss Wedderburn's annuity was to be paid to her every six months by the hands of a firm of lawyers. She did not seem to be grateful for the intimation; she sniffed audibly when reminded by her cousin of her obligation to Miss Kettlewell. And she contracted a curious habit, which did not tend towards good housekeeping, and irritated Mr. Wedderburn very considerably, of spending a great deal of her time at a certain passage-window, whence, as it happened, she had a side view into Dr. Fleming's garden.

They had not yet made their change of residence, and as they went in and out, as they stood at the long dining-

room windows or carried plants backwards and forwards from the conservatory to the house, Miss Wedderburn used to watch them with a set smile on her face which was not of a very agreeable nature. When they began to remove their goods to King's Leigh, she watched them still more closely. Once she saw Mrs. Fleming, and Chloe, holding each other's hands, walk for almost the last time, as it seemed, round the grassy lawn, as if reminding themselves that their life in the old town-house was almost over, and they should walk there no more.

"Don't be in such a hurry to say good-bye," Miss Wedderburn hissed to them from the passage-window, although no one could hear. "You'll be back again before long! Back with your happiness spoilt for ever. Back with tears and quarrels and worries and trials of all kinds. I shall sit here and watch till then. And then, when I have seen your troubles, I shall bless my own wits that helped me to outwit your malice, Miss Chloe, and the unspeakable folly of that madwoman, Keturah Kettlewell."

She smiled and kissed her hand to the mother and daughter in derision, being quite certain that she was not overlooked, and she was somewhat disconcerted when she heard Silas's voice behind her.

"What are you doing, Lavinia? You seem to be kissing your hand to someone. Are you not too old for these frivolities?"

"Not to any person in particular, Silas," said Miss Wedderburn meekly.

But she hated to be reminded of her age. "It was the old custom of kissing hands to the moon that occurred to me; I did it for luck."

"An accursed custom, practiced by idolaters," said Mr. Wedderburn, with displeasure. "Never let me see such superstitious rites in my dwelling, Lavinia."

And Lavinia promised humbly that he should never see them again.

## CHAPTER XXI.

## PERFECTLY FREE.

By the time of spring, the Flemings had settled down happily at King's Leigh, and felt as if they had lived there all their lives. Dr. Fleming indeed spent a good deal of his time at the house in Rushton, but it was always a delight to him to come back to the beautiful old rooms, the splendid terrace, the clipped yew-trees and climbing roses of King's Leigh. Mrs. Fleming was thoroughly happy. Even if, as she sometimes said, she would have to turn out one day and go back to Rushton, it would still be a pleasure to know that she had lived in so beautiful a place and that it belonged to one of her daughters. At present it seemed likely that Chloe would be the ultimate possessor of King's Leigh.

"For, as the newspapers say, an alliance was contemplated between Charles, Viscount Heron, and Millicent, younger daughter of Thomas Fleming Esquire, M. D. It did not sound like a distinguished alliance for Lord Heron, until it was explained (and Lady Hernesdale went everywhere explaining) that Millicent Fleming was one of the co-heiresses, you know, poor old Miss Kettlewell's heiresses, the rich Miss Kettlewell, who once was to have married one of the Hernesdales and retired into obscurity when he died. And then everyone said how suitable the arrangement was, and congratulated the Hernesdales. The Flemings also received a due share of congratulations, and it became apparent to everyone—except perhaps Dr. Fleming—that there would not be a very long engagement.

"The arrangement about King's Leigh is so very nice," Lady Hernesdale said to her intimates. "It is to be left to the girl who does not marry first, and thirty thousand

pounds will be paid over to the girl who marries, in lieu of the house. Now, as Charlie does not want a house, and does want money, this extra thirty thousand, in addition to dear Millicent's original fortune, will be most useful indeed." In short, as Dr. Fleming said, with a sort of toss of his head in the air, "If it were not for Keturah Kettlewell's money, none of the Hernesdales would have looked at Millicent." But Milly was radiantly happy in her love for Charlie Heron, as she still insisted on calling him, and no cloud seemed likely to dim the brightness of her sky. Early in the year, Lady Hernesdale carried her off to town, to show her a little of the world, she said; and the delights of a London season opened upon Milly's wondering eyes. She enjoyed them all, with the gaiety of a sweet and unspoiled nature; and neither vanity nor frivolity seemed to come near her. The only thing she sighed for sometimes was the presence of her mother, or of Chloe. But Lady Hernesdale turned a deaf ear to any hints about Chloe. She knew that the elder daughter of the Flemings was twice as beautiful and would make three times as much sensation as Milly; and she was desperately afraid that Chloe would marry first, and make over King's Leigh to Millicent. "I wish Charlie would marry her to-morrow and free us from the fear of that incubus," she said, almost plaintively, to her husband.

"Well, I don't know that I should describe King's Leigh as an incubus," he said with a laugh. "It's a very beautiful incubus at any rate."

"I am practical; I look at the main chance," said Lady Hernesdale, severely, "Charlie does not want King's Leigh and he does want that thirty thousand pounds."

"Well, we can't force it on," said Lord Hernesdale. "It would look as if we thought of nothing but the money."

"So we do," said the wife roundly. "If Milly Fleming, the country doctor's daughter, had not a half-penny, do you think that Heron would be engaged to her at the present moment?"

"We are all very worldly, I am afraid," said the Earl, shaking his white head. "But poor old Keturah's money is doing some good at last, if it makes those two young people happy."

Lady Hernesdale felt a little impatient; but as things were turning out so well she concluded that she could put up with her husband's sentimentality.

And Milly would not be driven. The least hint of pressure about her marriage made her restive, especially if it came from Lady Hernesdale. "I don't want to be married yet," she would say, rather stiffly. "My father says I am quite young, I ought to enjoy myself a little first."

Then to Charlie: "Oh, yes, my dear boy, I daresay I shall enjoy myself a great deal more when I am married and have you all to myself; but I can't help being a little nasty to your mamma, though I don't mean it, when she talks in that pitying way to me, as if I had never seen or known anything all the days of my life. Indeed, Charlie, I have had a very happy life, and I love my mother and father and sister so much that you must not expect me to want to leave them in a great hurry."

"Perhaps you would rather I removed my troublesome self altogether," said Charlie, who was not angry, but just on the verge perhaps, of becoming so."

Whereupon Milly turned upon him the most bewitching smile in the world. "You wouldn't like it, really, if you thought I didn't love my own people, would you?" she asked; and Lord Heron, with a reluctant laugh would own that he should be disappointed if he found that she was wanting in natural affection.

"I know what it is," said Milly. "Lady Hernesdale wants me not to have King's Leigh; and thinks that Chloe will marry before me if we don't take care; but she is wrong. Chloe will not marry for some time yet. Don't tell your mother what I say."

"Why won't she? Is she engaged to some one?"

"Oh, no, no; but I know—"



"What do you know? Tell me, Milly. I am fond of Chloe and should like to hear about her."

"There's really nothing to tell, only I think I know whom she likes, and who likes her—"

"Who is it?"

"You mustn't tell. You won't? You promise? Then, it is—Andrew Derrick."

"Eh? But—Andrew's a splendid old chap, but isn't it rather—rather—a come-down for Chloe?"

"What? when he's a splendid old chap! How mercenary you are, Charlie. However, there's no fear, or no hope, of its coming off. Andrew has gone round the world to get out of Chloe's way now that she is rich; and unless a second Miss Kettlewell would leave him a hundred thousand pounds or so, I don't suppose he will ever look at her again."

"And she—does she care?"

Milly seized a marguerite from a blue jar that stood on a console beside her, and began to strip it of its petals. "Un peu—passionement—pas du tout!" she said, repeating the old French charm; then she flung the flower down and turned her face away. "Don't ask me that," she said in a lower tone. "Poor Chloe!"

Charlie put his arm round her. He liked to see her in this softened mood. He was wise enough to know that the girl who loves her sister and her parents is all the more likely to love her husband, too.

"He'll be well enough off when his father dies, you know. Not equal to her in fortune, still he'll have a good independent income."

"Well, he may think better of it," said Milly, doubtingly, "but if he is so awfully proud and independent, perhaps he won't think it enough."

"He might get a good appointment, wouldn't that stand to him?" said Heron, thoughtfully. "It would give him a position and all that, you know. But everybody says influence isn't what it used to be. Why shouldn't he go into

Parliament and make a splurge, as the Yankees say? You see, it'll all come right in time, Milly. Who told you about it, little woman? Chloe?"

"Oh, no, how could Chloe speak of it?"

"I thought you women told each other everything?"

"Indeed, we don't. But we have ways of guessing that I think 'you men' don't understand. Nobody has told me anything. And yet I see it all—I know it all—"

"Then it's just possible that you may be wrong?"

"I'm not wrong," said Milly firmly. "It's no use comforting yourself with that theory. As if I didn't know my own sister!"

Lord Heron laughed and gave up the argument. But he did not forget the things he had been told, and mentioned to his father that Andrew Derrick was a clever and meritorious young man ("our side, too!") who might be invaluable if he had a seat in the House, or a position in which his great talents could be turned to account. And although the Earl shrugged his shoulders a little over Heron's recommendation, he bore it in mind.

During the spring months that Milly spent in London, Chloe was pursuing a very quiet and uneventful course at King's Leigh. She read a good deal, she walked and talked with her mother, she visited the poor. When it was proposed to her to go up to town for the season, she shrank from the idea and refused it unhesitatingly. The only thing that she herself seemed to desire was a period of complete tranquillity. It was almost to please her mother rather than herself that in the month of April she asked Frances Corbet, as she was still called, to spend a fortnight with her.

Frances had been leading a quiet life also, but perhaps it was not so peaceful as that of Chloe. Laurence had always congratulated himself on having brought up a perfectly sane, sensible, matter-of-fact young woman, whose nature, although he thought it a trifle cold, would preserve her from many of the troubles and trials of most women's

lives. But of late, Frances had passed out of his ken; and he had scarcely discovered the fact that it was not until he ceased to understand her that he fell in love with her. As long as her mind and brain were open to him, as a child's to her best friend, he was interested but not much moved; when they closed round her developing nature as the petals of a rose fold themselves round its flowing heart, he began to be unquiet, curious, almost jealous of her reserve. She drew herself more and more away from him as time went on, and while treating him with affectionate courtesy, ceased to render the old tribute of a child's whole-hearted love. And he did not like the change.

Then, when he had been ill-advised enough to make her an offer of marriage, he found that things were worse than ever. He had frightened her, alienated her. They never could be to each other what they had been before. The relation of guardian and ward sank into insignificance. Laurence had never dared to give her the old paternal salute since the day that he had changed her view of him by asking her to be his wife. He said angrily to himself sometimes that he had no desire for that kind of salute. Either Frances must kiss him because she loved him, or she need not kiss him at all. And sometimes he wished himself back again in those happy years when she had been to him like his own child. What were they now? A man and a woman, cooped up together in the same house; he the host, she the guest, with a strange woman always between them as chaperon, for the sake of the proprieties. Laurence began to think that it was too much for him to bear, and that he must himself contrive some method of getting out of the way. Accordingly, he went to London several times and accepted one or two invitations to country houses, and began to absorb himself in county and political business. He did not know how sorely Frances felt the change. Instead of long mornings devoted to study or amusement in his companionship, instead of rides and drives and walks together, she had to put up with the

somewhat uninteresting society of Mrs. Lester, who, with all her best endeavors, could not match Laurence as a companion or a friend. Frances soon became very weary of this state of things, and hailed with relief the invitation from Chloe to stay for a week or two at King's Leigh.

"You would like to go?" Laurence said, without looking at her, when she had handed the note to him.

"Yes, I should like it. If you do not object," she added dutifully.

His brows contracted as he gave her back the note. "You are a perfectly free agent, Frances. Accept the invitation by all means."

"Thank you," she said; and turned to leave the room, when suddenly he spoke again. She had ventured into the library to show him Chloe's letter.

"Milly Fleming is in town," he said. "I was thinking that you would like, perhaps, to go to London after Easter and see a little of—of—society. I have an old friend in London, Lady Brabazon—I know she would be most happy to have you and to take you about."

Frances glanced at him, from her halt midway between the writing table and the door.

"Mrs. Lester?" she said, inquiringly.

"Mrs. Lester would keep house here. I should be running backwards and forwards, paying visits and so on."

Frances looked down; she seemed to have a difficulty in replying.

"Oh, don't go if you don't wish," said Laurence, irritably. "No one wishes to force you into anything. You forget that you are perfectly free to do what you choose." He took up a newspaper as he spoke.

"Am I?" said Frances, quietly.

The tone made him look at her. Her lip was quivering, her eyelashes were heavy with tears. He dashed his newspaper down and stood up.

"What can I do or say?" he exclaimed, walking hurriedly towards her, and then stopping short as if he dared not

proceed. "Frances, you wring my heart. Why do you reject every proposal I make for your happiness? Why don't you see that I want you to do what you like best? Be frank—be the Frank I used to know," he added, altering the phrase, "and tell me simply what you wish."

The tone carried more weight than the words. The tone was eager, passionate, as of a man who suffered more than he knew how to bear. There was reproach in it, too. Frances listened, struggled with herself, and made answer, rather faintly:

"I would rather not go to London, then."

"Oh. Very well." He let his hand drop to the table with a heavy sigh, as though he were oppressed. But she did not seem to hear or see.

"And I should very much like to go to King's Leigh."

"Certainly."

"And while I am there—you won't mind so much if I am staying there and not here, will you? I want—I want—very much to hear my father preach in the chapel, and—perhaps—to speak to him."

Laurence looked straight at her, still leaning on his hand. "You wish to make his acquaintance? To tell him the truth?"

There was a pause before Frances could wind herself up to say reluctantly:

"I wish to feel myself free to do so if I like."

"Oh, free!" said Laurence, contemptuously, moving some books away with his hand. "You know you are perfectly free to do just as you choose."

"No—not unless—you consent. I know you wish me not to tell him."

"The time has gone by when my wishes can be said to have much effect on your actions, I am afraid. You are old enough to judge for yourself."

Then she raised her eyes and looked at him. They were not filled with tears now; they were dry and shone with a

steady light. She spoke clearly and strongly. He had never heard such a tone from her before.

"You are unkind," she said, "and unfair. I care more about the fairness than the kindness. You have perhaps a right to be no longer very kind to me; but you ought to be just. You taught me to love justice and truth; I am only asking for both." And then, without waiting for his reply, she turned and swiftly left the room, leaving Laurence utterly confounded, but only half repentant, after all.

## CHAPTER XXII.

## A BARGAIN.

Frances did not appear at luncheon, and Laurence would have been impressed with the uncomfortable sensation of having spoken and acted like a brute, had not Mrs. Lester remarked that the Vicar's wife had called that morning and had carried the girl off to early dinner because there was so much to be done in preparation for a Mothers' Meeting Tea. Mr. Corbet shrugged his shoulders and tried not to look supercilious.

"So she preferred a Mothers' Meeting to seeing me again," he said to himself illogically. And then he went for a long, solitary ride, from which he did not return until it was time to dress for dinner. And he wondered whether she would remain at the Vicarage all the evening, and did not dare to ask; but he felt a sensation of great pleasure and relief when he saw her in the drawing-room, which he entered as the gong sounded for dinner. If he had vaguely hoped that she would be contrite and distressed, he was disappointed; for Frances bore herself with remarkable cheerfulness and gave some racy accounts of the sayings and doings of the mothers.

"It seems to have been quite uproariously gay in fact," said Mr. Corbet, dryly.

Frances shot a swift question out of her dark eyes at him, and he felt condemned and miserable. But she answered with her usual simplicity and directness.

"It was not uproarious gaiety: you could hardly fancy Mrs. Willoughby encouraging any kind of uproariousness. But we were all quite cheerful—and—good-humored." This word was added in a lower key, and Frances went on very quickly as if she had not meant it to be overheard.

"Old Mrs. Corby amazed us by guessing nearly every riddle that was asked; and you know what a stock of riddles the Vicar possesses. Some of the women played *La Grace* on the lawn; it was rather funny to see them; they were so excited over it; and Mrs. Robinson, the washer-woman, you know, proved herself excellent at croquet."

"I hope they would not catch cold," said Mrs. Lester, anxiously. "Was the grass dry, my dear?"

"Oh, yes, quite dry, thank you. There were rugs and mats everywhere for people who were sitting still, and anyone who felt cold might go inside the house. It was such a warm, sunny day, too, I think you would have enjoyed it, Mrs. Lester. I am so sorry you were not there."

Laurence caught himself thinking what a brave, bright manner and face she had, and how she herself carried sunshine wherever she went. A gleam of it even came into Mrs. Lester's unimpassioned countenance, as she answered:

"Thank you, my dear, but I think I was better at home. You know how susceptible I am to cold; and I am nearly sure that there was a touch of east in the wind. Now am I not right, Laurence? Was there not a touch of east?"

"North-east, I should say," replied Laurence rather grimly; and Miss Frances opened big eyes at him until she realized that his reply was of an entirely allegorical nature, when she blushed suddenly and looked down at her plate.

Each now felt that a shot had been delivered, and it was perhaps time to call for terms of peace. So that Frances was not altogether astonished when, after dinner, Laurence spoke to her just as she was going out of the room. "Could you come back for a minute or two? I just want to arrange with you about going to King's Leigh."

She came back silently, while Mrs. Lester swept onward to the drawing-room and stood by the fire.

"Won't you sit down? We can't talk comfortably if you are standing," said Laurence, putting his hand on the back



of a chair. She seated herself immediately and then he also drew a chair to the wood fire, which was pleasant to see, although the day had been so warm.

"On what day did Chloe ask you to go?" he said, wasting no time on preliminaries.

"Next Tuesday. This is Thursday."

"And—for how long?"

"She says something about a week or two. I should think she means ten days or a fortnight."

"Yes. I hope you will enjoy yourself."

She looked up at him and seemed to expect more; there was something in his tone not easy to understand.

"When you come back, I think I shall probably have vanished. I have an idea of seeing Russia, and of then going on to India. My old wandering instincts have revived, you see. I don't know when I shall get back."

Frances's lips moved, but she did not speak; she had grown very pale.

"The house here is at your disposition," Laurence went on, "and if you feel inclined to go to London, either Mrs. Lester will chaperon you, or you can go to Lady Brabazon's—or perhaps with the Flemings or the Hernesdales. You can do exactly as you please. I think you will be comfortable; if there is anything I can do to make you more so, you must let me know."

"Comfortable!" The word had an indignant ring as it fell from Frances's lips.

"Well, what have I said that is wrong? I seem doomed to-day to say things you don't like," said Laurence, with gloomy brows.

"I did not mean to be rude," said Frances, moderating her indignation. "It only seemed to me that you thought I had everything I wanted so long as I was 'comfortable' in the sense of having a nice house, pretty rooms, horses and carriages, good things to eat and drink, and so on."

"Most people," said Laurence, dryly, "use the adjective to signify these things."

"But you always used to say that they were not the things that mattered?"

"They matter very considerably to a girl."

"Because she is supposed to be unable to do without them? She cannot work for herself?"

"Because she is less strong than a man, and needs to be taken care of and looked after."

"And this is how you take care of me and look after me," said Frances quickly, "you who said you would do it—by going away and leaving me here—with Mrs. Lester."

She had scored a point. Corbet frowned and looked down.

"I never thought of going away until—"

He did not finish the sentence. But Frances finished off for him.

"Until I refused to be taken care of just in your way! Then I say that you are breaking our bargain, Laurence—Cousin Laurence." Her voice softened and broke upon the old familiar name. "What you have said to me all these years has been that when I was grown up I could be your companion, your friend. I could be more to you as a woman than a child—"

"Don't I say so still?"

She went on as though she had not heard.

"You used to describe the life that we should lead, here at Denstone, how I should help you to get to know the people on the estate, and learn to know things that would be useful in managing it; and that in the evenings I should sing to you and read to you, and make your life cheerful and happy—here at Denstone—"

"And you agreed to it all," said Laurence in a low voice. "Yet, when I ask you to do it in the only effectual way, you—refuse."

"That was not in your mind when you used to talk to me," said Frances quickly. "It is not like you to use these subterfuges, Cousin Laurence. You used to talk as if—as if—you were—so much older and would always take

care of me as you did when I was a child. You spoke even —" her voice faltered and grew lower—"of giving me away some day in marriage—you did not speak as you speak now-a-days; you did not want—the impossible."

"I don't see why it should be impossible," said Laurence doggedly. "But I speak only as I am guided by circumstances, Frances. In those old days, I never thought of you as anything but a child. I felt much older than you—much older than I feel now, although I confess that I am too old a man for you to love. It has been only since I have seen you as a woman that I feel as I do now. And when I am face to face with the difficulties that beset you, and will beset you all your life if somebody does not intervene—the impossibility of giving a detailed account of the way in which you came into my hands, the scandalous tongues of women, the propinquity of your relations, who are not very pleasant people, really Frances, when I consider all this, I think that I am doing my very best for you when I ask you to be my wife."

"I have no doubt that I ought to be very much obliged to you," said Frances, with curling lip, "but I do not mean to marry any man because he thinks it would be 'best for me.'"

"Not even if he loves you?"

"There has been no question of love in the matter," said Frances, coldly.

"That is where you mistake, Frances. That is just where I did not make myself clear—in my very anxiety for your welfare. I do love you, I love you with all my heart and soul."

She looked at him for a moment, and bit her lips. Then her eyes fell before his.

"It comes late," she said, with a delicate inflection of satire in her voice, which cut Laurence to the quick.

"I have made many a mistake in my life," he said, rising from his chair and standing before her, "but never a greater one than I made when I let you think that I asked you

to be my wife without letting you know that I asked it for my own sake, and not for yours. I was fool enough to put the material side first. Perhaps, when I began to speak, I was hardly conscious of the reality, the depth of my love. It seems to me more that every fiber of you is mine, Frances, as if I myself, body, soul and spirit, belong to you. It is you who keep me away from you and I cannot bear any longer to be in your presence and feel myself cut off from you: it is as though my veins had been opened and my life was ebbing away. You won't understand the feeling, but it's a real one, I can tell you. So, if I go away, it is not because I am unkind, but because I love you so much that I can't bear to see you and hear you, and know that you are in the house and that you don't care for me—one brass farthing."

"Oh," said Frances, covering her face with her hands, "this is worse. I had rather you had not loved me—than this."

"Well, in some ways, so would I," said Laurence. "But we can't choose our burdens, you see. Fate has laid this one on me, that I should love you with all my heart—you, as a woman, not as a child—and that you should not care for me—as I said, one—"

"That is not true, Laurence. Indeed, that is not true. I love you—as a child loves—"

"Yes, yes, I understand. I am your guardian, and you have always been kind and loving to me in that relationship! I wonder what would have happened if I had come to you as a stranger: should I have had a better chance? One cannot tell."

"I am sorry," Frances said, in a choked voice; and then she could say no more. For some minutes, also, Mr. Corbet did not speak: then at last he said, softly and earnestly:

"There is one thing I want to ask you, Frances. You do believe now, do you not, that I love you? I only ask you to believe. It will be a comfort to me, if you will say that you believe me."

"Yes, I believe," said Frances, looking up with a pale face and wet, shining eyes. "But I have something to ask you, too."

"Yes."

"You must not go away."

"Do you want to make me suffer?"

"No, but we must take a different path. It is I who will go away, and leave you free to live your own life."

"And you think that would make things any better? And pray where would you go?"

"I have not thought it out yet. I should find some place. Perhaps—I have been thinking—that I ought to go to my father and help to make his house happy—"

"Frances!"

"And at any rate, this I am sure of, and solemnly vow, that if you go abroad, instead of staying here and attending to your duties—for you have duties here, Laurence, I have seen enough of the place to be able to tell you that—if you go abroad to Russia and India as you said, I will walk straight out of your house directly you have gone, and will earn my own living and never see your face again. For I shall know that you are a coward, that you have shirked your duty; and you brought me up to look upon a coward as the vilest thing on earth."

"If I stay, then, will you consent to give up this idea of going away from Denstone? I'll live at the Grange, or in London—anywhere, so that you are not deprived of a home."

Frances shook her head. "I will make no bargain," she said. "I only tell you what I will do, if you go away."

He hesitated. "You are hard on me, Frances."

"It is not hard to want you to do your duty," she said, her beautiful face glowing as she raised it from the hand on which she had been resting it. "You are strong: you can do it if you try. And I shall not be here to hinder you."

"If not here, you will be in safe hands—in the house of

someone whom I know and trust," said Laurence, almost violently.

"Certainly, that is most likely. But tell me, you will stay?"

"Well—I will stay—if you—"

"No 'ifs'," she said quickly. "You will stay, of course, as I knew you would. And at present I am going to the Flemings. Perhaps they would like me to stay on with them for a time. Afterwards, we will consider. And you must not be angry with me if I say that I am going to see my father."

"Seek him if you like. I don't think it will be much pleasure to you."

"And I must use my own discretion as to whether I tell him or not?"

"Of the relationship? I suppose so. I cannot oppose your wish. But I will ask you to remember all it means. Do you feel anxious to have that woman who has behaved so badly to the Flemings, claiming cousinship with you? Do you want to be known henceforth as Frances Wedderburn, the Dissenting minister's daughter?"

"I don't know. I sometimes think truth is best," said Frances, mournfully.

"Well, at any rate, don't let them inveigle you out of any money."

"Money? I have none to give."

"Nonsense: yes, you have. You have six thousand pounds in the funds, made over to you legally some years ago. But you had better not say so to Miss Wedderburn."

Frances reproached him and thanked him in a look.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

## DOCTOR FLEMING'S SUBSCRIPTION.

"Yes," said Mr. Derrick, "the chapel's doing fine. I don't deny it. Wedderburn's a good man—a very good man. He'll fill the new premises quite as well as he's filled them in Zion Lane."

"Ay?" said Dr. Fleming, with an interrogative turn, "so your subscription list is full, too, is it?"

"Yes, sir, yes. Very well filled. Are you going to give us a fiver, doctor? You said the other day that we were doing good work in the town."

The doctor's eye glistened. He put his head on one side and surveyed Mr. Derrick attentively.

"I said so, did I? But I'm a church and state man, you know. How do you account for my talking in that way, Derrick? I'm sure I didn't say it to you?"

"No, no: you said it to Andrew, just before he went away, alluding to those cases of diphtheria in Friarsgate, you know, doctor. Wedderburn stuck to his duty like a man."

"Yes, and all the more creditable to him, seeing he was frightened out of his wits about catching it," muttered the doctor to himself. Then, in a louder tone, "Well, didn't Andrew tell you how I backed my opinion?"

"Eh? no, he didn't. Don't go, doctor"—for Fleming was quickening his pace. "Don't go. Tell me what you mean. Did you send a subscription?"

"Look in your list, man!" cried the doctor, flourishing his stick as he walked onward, more quickly than Derrick could follow him, even on a bright spring day. "Look in your subscription list." And off he went, leaving Mr. Derrick rather inclined to grumble.

"We ought to get our subscription list," he said to himself, as he wandered round the space marked out for the foundation of the new chapel, and marked the heaps of stone and rubbish which were accumulating in its neighborhood. "I could then send it printed to some of the county people round about, and interest them in the building. Did Fleming really mean that Andrew had got something out of him? Well done, Andrew!" But why had he never mentioned the fact to him? He thought he might as well go round to Wedderburn's at once and talk to him about getting out the list.

He made his way rather slowly, for he was decidedly rheumatic, to the minister's door, and was admitted to the minister's study. Miss Wedderburn looked over the balusters at him as he entered the house. If she were Silas's wife, she said to herself, she would follow and learn his business as a matter of course. It was a shame that she was not permitted to do such a thing, all because she was only his cousin and not his wife. As to the claim of an ordained ministry and the inferiority of women, Lavinia Wedderburn never thought of such a thing.

As she stepped about her household duties, she found that she had to go into a large linen cupboard which was situated behind the study. And when there she made a curious discovery. There had once been a small window in the linen cupboard, opening into the study. The glass had been removed, and the aperture was covered with a square of glazed glass calico. This, again, was situated immediately behind a bookcase, and through the thin covering all voices in the study could be distinctly heard in the linen cupboard, which was large enough to allow a person to stand with the door shut, close to the shelves and immediately beneath the opening. Miss Wedderburn was delighted. It was almost as convenient as Miss Kettlewell's hanging wardrobe had been. Now she would be able to learn the secrets of those persons who weakly committed them to Mr. Wedderburn's hearing; now she could



get a mastery over Silas such as she had never achieved before. But she would not let him know the secret of that opening in the wall: she would keep that to herself. And if anyone found her in the linen cupboard, what could any one say? She was only tidying the linen, getting out clean towels or putting away the table cloths—she hadn't been there a minute. Miss Wedderburn has learned caution: she did not mean to be caught again.

She listened now—eagerly. But she heard nothing but generalities, calculations of church expenses, remarks about subscription lists. Curiosity caused her, however, still to linger, and she heard something at last which sounded interesting. Interesting because it made her cousin falter and stammer, as if he were confused. Mr. Derrick's loud voice was as distinct as possible, but Silas Wedderburn's was very far from clear.

"We'll get out the list as soon as possible, then, Wedderburn. Let me see, we've been a bit unbusiness-like hitherto, have we not? We must have a general meeting and see to things."

"Yes, yes," Mr. Wedderburn said, rather nervously. "anything you please, Mr. Derrick, of course."

"You see, all subscriptions ought to come to me as treasurer," said Matthew Derrick, rather more loudly. "And they seem to have been paid here, there, and everywhere."

"Alden, the grocer, told me he had received some," said the minister, "and asked whether he should send them on to me—or to you."

"To me—to me, of course. You told him so, I hope."

"I said something of the kind. I will step round and see him again. I made a memorandum at the time, but—my memory is so bad—"

"Never mind: look it up and let me know another time," said Mr. Derrick. "We shall muddle our accounts sadly if this sort of thing goes on. You ministers are not good business men, eh, Mr. Wedderburn?"

"We are not, indeed. I have often lamented my ig-

norance of business matters. I do my best, of course, but my own accounts are sometimes in—in—a little confusion," said Mr. Wedderburn, with a propitiatory tone in his voice which drove Lavinia nearly wild with exasperation.

"Ah, that is a pity. Looks bad in a minister, you know," said Mr. Derrick's keen, penetrating voice. "You are no doubt keeping a strict eye on the subscriptions, however? The best way would be always to pay them in immediately to my account at the bank, wouldn't it?"

"Certainly, Mr. Derrick,"—with a touch of offense. "I trust that you do not consider me guilty of any carelessness in that respect—"

"Oh, good Lord, no!" said Mr. Derrick, in quite a flurried tone. "My dear sir, how could I think of such a thing? I should be very sorry to suggest anything of the kind. These ideas just passed through my mind as I was walking along: chiefly because I met Fleming, you know—Dr. Fleming—"

"Dr. Fleming," Silas repeated, in a toneless voice. "Yes, sir?"

"Fleming's a good fellow," Mr. Derrick went out of his way to observe. "A very good fellow. No prejudices, but gives to church or chapel wherever money is really required. He gave me to understand that my son Andrew had asked him for a contribution—"

"I remember! I remember! Your son mentioned it to me when he came to say good-bye," said Mr. Wedderburn, hastily.

"Ah, that's right. Now, then, you can tell me how much it was," said Mr. Derrick cheerfully. "Fleming wouldn't let it out. Andrew gave it to you, I suppose?"

"No, I think not," said the minister, in a tone of extreme perturbation. "I—I think not, Mr. Derrick. I think I should have remembered. Unless it were a small sum—I have a list of small sums here which I can consult. Mrs. Harvey gave me two shillings in coppers the other day, and Bloxam the shoemaker brought three three-penny

pieces. These are the contributions which come to us from our poorer members, and which, I must say, I like to receive."

"Quite so: I like 'em, too. The widow's mite, and all that," said Mr. Derrick, approvingly. "It shows that their heart is in the right place, does it not? But about this subscription of Fleming's, Mr. Wedderburn—"

"Perhaps it was paid to Mr. Alden. I will inquire, and send you a note."

"You're sure it wasn't paid to you, then?"

"Sir!" said Mr. Wedderburn with such sudden fierceness that Mr. Derrick drew back and apologized.

"I didn't mean any offense, I'm sure—I beg your pardon, Wedderburn," said the old man in a kindly tone. "It was only a casual question. Don't trouble about the matter now. I dare say I interrupted you in the middle of your sermon, now, didn't I? You'll just send me the note and pay the money in to my account some day next week: to-day's Saturday, you won't have time to do it to-day. Good-bye, my dear sir: don't you get mixing yourself up over accounts: they're not in your line, and preaching is. Let's have a good rousing sermon to-morrow night, that will stir them all up: that's what we want at Zion Lane."

And with a resounding clap on the minister's shoulder, Mr. Derrick said good-bye and made his way out by the front door. He passed Alden's shop as he went down the street and hesitated a moment as to whether he should or should not go in and interview the grocer on the subject of the subscriptions; but there were a good many people in the shop, and he thought it might be difficult to get hold of his brother deacon at that time. So he went home and employed his leisure afternoon by writing his weekly letter to Andrew, in which he detailed his meeting with Dr. Fleming, his interview with Mr. Wedderburn, and his own dissatisfaction with the unbusiness-like way in which the subscriptions were collected. It was just as well that he did write that afternoon, he thought, for he awoke next

morning in the throes of his old enemy the gout, and some days elapsed before he felt able to write again. Dr. Fleming came and went, but for a week or more, chapel matters passed out of Mr. Derrick's mind: he had a more engrossing matter to dwell upon.

Miss Wedderburn had by this time managed to insert a penknife and cut two slits in the linen covering of the window, so that she could make a triangular opening whenever she desired. At first, it seemed as though this opening would be of little use to her, except in so far as it enabled her to hear more distinctly, but she soon found that by extending it a little, she reached a spot where the books in the open shelves were considerably lower than the others, so that a space was afforded through which she could look straight into the study.

Her cousin's demeanor, on his return from accompanying Mr. Derrick to the door, considerably surprised her. First of all, he went to the window and opened it cautiously; then leaned out, as if he were watching some one down the street. Finally he drew his head back, closed the window, and ejaculated something: Miss Wedderburn thought that it was "Thank God!"

She watched him closely. His face was white and damp with perspiration. His lips worked strangely. Lavinia could not imagine what was the matter with him. Suddenly he sank into the great easy chair, buried his face in his hands and let it sink almost to his knees, then burst into a terrible fit of tears. Lavinia watched him for a moment, with no sensation of sympathy: rather with a certain disgust. She watched him while he threw himself on his knees and gasped out prayers and cries for mercy and help to the God in whom he believed. But even this sight did not melt her. All that she felt capable of experiencing was a sour contempt for the man who had managed his affairs so badly as to be obliged "to steal from the chapel funds." For this was how Miss Wedderburn phrased it to herself.

But she was terribly alarmed lest any one should surprise him in this attitude of self-humiliation. If he were seen, sobbing out words of prayer upon his knees, would not all Rushton know in a day or two of his piteous plight? For to her, all signs of penitence or humility were tokens of weakness. She had never lived in any atmosphere where they were respected or admired. Strong, self "assertive" assurance of salvation was the fashion in Zion Lane. The tenderer virtues flourished only in by-ways and dark corners.

Miss Wedderburn abandoned her watch, locked up the linen cupboard, and planted herself in the hall, so that nobody should get to the study door without being intercepted. She made an excuse that certain knobs and pegs in the hall wanted rubbing and polishing, and she devoted herself assiduously to this work for the next hour and a half. Several members of the congregation called; but she turned them all away. She said that it was quite impossible for them to see Mr. Wedderburn that morning.

The minister did not know of that self-appointed watch when he came out, white and weary, at half-past one o'clock, expecting dinner. He had no idea that any one had heard his conference with Mr. Derrick, or could draw evil conclusions from it if they had. Lavinia gave him a sharp look, and wondered whether he meant to confide in her. She decided that he did not. Well! give him a little time. It was quite possible that he would tell her as much as she wanted to know, whenever she chose to turn the screw. At present she was contented to let him make his sermons in his study, and not disturb him with any reflections on his past or predictions for his future. In fact she was extremely considerate towards him for the rest of the day, furnishing him with choice meats and drinks, and advising him to take all care of himself, for she did not think he looked very well. Whereat Silas winced a good deal, for he particularly wanted to look well and seem at his ease just then. But never had his sermon seemed to him

more difficult to write. As to the long extempore prayers that he was in the habit of making, he felt that his want of unction would be peculiarly remarked in them; and he went so far as to make notes for them as well as for his sermon—a thing which he had always condemned very severely in other ministers when he had known of their doing it.

Miss Wedderburn did not generally go twice to chapel on Sunday, but on this Sunday she presented herself at both morning and evening service. She had some curiosity to hear what Silas had got to say.

The morning sermon was peculiarly dry and uninviting. It was "a good Gospel sermon," as the people said; but nobody was impressed by it. "You must wait till the evening if you want to hear one of our minister's great efforts," said one wheezy individual to another in Lavinia's hearing, as they walked out together at the chapel gates. Lavinia smiled bitterly to herself. Yes, she wanted to hear one of the minister's "great efforts" too. If all she believed were true, it would be an "effort" indeed.

She was in her accustomed place at night. The "long prayer" was very long indeed, and very full of references to the public events of the day. Old Bloxam, the shoemaker, once said that Mr. Wedderburn's long prayer was as good as a newspaper. "Summed up the events of the past week and presented 'em to the Lord, in what you might call a masterly manner," he observed. But it was generally thought that Bloxam was a little too free in his observations.

When Mr. Wedderburn announced his text, Miss Wedderburn gasped. What had induced him, she wondered, to select those words? "Be sure your sin will find you out," he read. She felt almost faint.

And, as he read the text for the second time, she saw him also start and grow pale and put his hand to his throat, as if disturbed by some new and overwhelming sensation. Was it because he had seen her, his cousin, in her seat, that

he was startled? Surely not. Miss Wedderburn cast a furtive look behind her, and was startled in her turn. For not two pews away, she distinguished the fine pale face, the beautiful dark eyes and proudly poised head of Frances, Mr. Corbet's ward, and—though Lavinia did not know it—the daughter of Silas Wedderburn.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

## THE MINISTER'S SERMON.

Frances had not achieved her purpose without some difficulty. She had Laurence's consent, certainly, but she had also to obtain Mrs. Fleming's sanction, and this was somewhat difficult to do, without hurting the feelings of the doctor's wife. Mrs. Fleming was a good church-woman, for one thing, and had never been within the walls of a meeting-house in her life. Then she had been seriously annoyed by the reflections cast on her husband by Miss Wedderburn, and she naturally identified that lady with her cousin the minister. "My dear, you may depend upon it, they are both alike," she said. "Miss Wedderburn used to be always going to see her cousin, and she is now an inmate of his house. It is said that he is going to marry her. That shows that he approves of her astonishing conduct to Dr. Fleming and Miss Kettlewell. Perhaps you have not heard the details?"

"Yes, I think I have," said Frances, faintly. "But Mr. Wedderburn is said to be a very good preacher, I think."

"In his own line, yes," answered Mrs. Fleming, with coldness. "But he is not a clergyman, you see, and I really do not like—"

"Dear Mrs. Fleming," Frances said, with tears in her eyes, "please let me go. It is not simply from curiosity: I have a real reason. Mr. Corbet said I might go if I liked. He understands why—but I'm afraid I must not tell you—yet."

"I don't wish to prevent you, dear, if you have a real reason for going," said Mrs. Fleming gently, though with a touch of coldness, by which Frances felt more wounded than she could well express.



For if her friends objected to her simply going to hear Mr. Wedderburn preach, what would they say when they knew that she was his daughter? Frances supposed in her own heart, that they would never speak to her again. And yet her soul rose in revolt against their judgment. She might be kin to the Wedderburns, and yet utterly different from them in nature and spirit: she might surely rise above the temptations to which her father seemed especially exposed. For herself she could say that she did not think she had any inclination to cowardice; she was quite sure that she could not be ungrateful and crafty and unscrupulous like Lavinia Wedderburn. But her relationship to them might very possibly put an end to her friendship with many persons whom she had learned to love. And yet she felt that she could not help it: something was working within her which was stronger than herself.

"I do not quite know how to manage it," Mrs. Fleming said, with that tinge of coldness which was so unusual with her. "I hardly like the carriage—suppose we send to Rushton for a cab?"

"Yes, let me have a cab," said Frances eagerly. "Then you will have no responsibility, and I can just go my own way."

But again Mrs. Fleming demurred. She was still hesitating when Dr. Fleming walked in and by a few decided words cleared all the cobwebs of doubt away.

"I'll take her in my brougham," he said. "I've got to go into the town that night—to see Mr. Derrick, who is laid up with the gout. I can drop Frances at the chapel, and arrange to call, or send the brougham for her, when I come back."

"You think it is right for her to go?" said Mrs. Fleming.

"Right? Why not? Wedderburn is worth hearing. I would go with her myself if I hadn't to see old Derrick. Wedderburn's not a bad fellow, although his relation is a bit of a fraud: we mustn't always judge people by their relations, you know, Margaret." He would have been

amazed to know the passion of gratitude towards him which sprang up in Frances's breast, as he said the words.

On Sunday evening, therefore, Frances was driven in the doctor's brougham to the door of the chapel in Zion Lane. She was at once shown into an empty green-lined pew, exactly fronting the pulpit, and was told in an audible whisper that it was "Mr. Derrick's seat." Mr. Derrick's big-print Bible and hymn-book lay on the ledge before her. She took down the hymn-book, and felt her fingers tremble as she turned over the pages. They were all quite familiar to her. It was the book that she had used as a child.

She was almost frightened to feel the place so homelike to her. She had not entered a chapel of this kind since she was nine years old; but the sight of its bareness and ugliness—for they really did want a new chapel in Zion Lane!—brought back the memory of places strangely like it that she had seen in her childish days. The straight brown pews, the worm-eaten pulpit and reading desk. The little railed-off space which did duty for a chancel, the one round stained glass rose window which relieved the monotony of the yellow washed walls and arched windows of plain glass—she had seen them all before. She remembered this kind of place better than the new-built fanes of modern days—the "churches" with tapering spires, and much varnished open seats, red cushions and incandescent light. When the minister came in, in black gown and white bands, she almost uttered a cry. He was so like a picture of him that hung in the background of her mind—a picture of him standing before an Australian audience and electrifying them by his words—that she had great difficulty in keeping the tears from her eyes, the queer hysterical choking from her throat.

His voice made things even worse for her. It was still mellow and musical, and as he read aloud the hymn that they were about to sing, it fell on Frances's ears with singular power. She felt as if in a curious waking dream.

When she closed her eyes she could believe herself a little girl, in the pew beside her mother, with that mother's hand clasped in her own. Together they had listened to that resonant musical voice: they had nestled closer to each other when they bent their heads before the book-board for the twenty minutes prayer. Frances felt as if her mother were beside her now. She was conscious of a strange new tenderness towards that long-lost father of hers; as if the mother who had loved him were pleading with her for the man who had failed his child—perhaps his child's mother also—in the hour of need. For the first time, Frances knew that she could forgive him his desertion of her—if at least he cared for her forgiveness.

She saw him start when his eye rested upon her, and wondered whether he guessed that she was his child. Then she saw Miss Wedderburn glance at her, and she averted her face. Looking at her father, she saw him gradually recover himself, and she understood, that he might have been—for the second time—startled by a likeness, but that he had by no means recognized her. For if he had recognized her, how could he so composedly have given out his text?—that text which must surely carry its warning to his own heart as well as to his congregation—"Be sure your sins will find you out."

It was a very telling sermon, rising here and there into real excellence. Up to a certain point it both softened and excited Frances. She was carried away by the old appeals, which seemed so vaguely familiar to her—the cry to the unconverted to repent and come back to a God of Love, who could be a God of Vengeance, too: it moved her as it had moved her in her childish days. She heard a girl sobbing behind her: she felt almost inclined to sob now. If Laurence Corbet or Dr. Fleming had known the state of nervous agitation into which the services had thrown her, they would bitterly have regretted the fact that she had come.

But Silas Wedderburn himself undid his work.

He was a sensational preacher, depending a good deal on the inspiration of the moment for his most emotional flights; and on this night of all nights, his mind reverted to the scenes which he had witnessed on board the Attaman, on the night when it was burnt to the water's edge. He painted the awful scenes in the strongest colors; he described the volumes of smoke, the reddening sea and sky, the frenzied rush for the boats, as only an orator could describe them. He pictured the cry of captured souls, whose sins had found them out in the hour of danger and of death; and he pointed his descriptions by heartrending questions as to the state in which his hearers would perhaps have been found, had they been, like himself, upon that burning ship.

Frances listened, and all the softness, all the affection, died out of her.

She could not easily understand the disposition of a man to whom all experience became in the long run literary material. Such a disposition is often seen in the people who write books; but it is less common in a preacher. It often conduces very much, however, to the success of an orator. And it is probable that the orator's relations who know him and love him, are reconciled to the fact that the deepest sorrows, the greatest failures, of the man's life are put under contribution to make his speech or his sermon more convincing. With certain regulations, it is good that a man should use his personal experience in this way. But under the circumstances, Frances found her father's graphic description of the shipwreck very revolting.

Whether it was there or not, she could not help suspecting a desire to magnify himself in his hearers' eyes. From his account, one would have fancied—although he did not exactly say it—that he had been the one calm, dignified figure on board the burning ship, that he had prayed with the penitent, exhorted the sinner, calmed the fears of those who were afraid. And what was the reality as Frances remembered it? A pale, distorted countenance, a voice

shrill with fear, an attempt to escape which was rudely countervailed by those who were more brave than he, another attempt, more cowardly still, which would have cost his daughter her life had not Laurence Corbet intervened—these were the pictures that his glowing words called up to Frances's mind. And her father was preaching about it, and drawing his model from it, and vaunting himself as a brave man, while his daughter listened and seemed to hear an echo of his agonized, cowardly cry—"I must escape. . . . Mine is a valuable life. . . . I will not die."

"Possibly, by some curious chain of association, it was the sight of Frances's face which had set the minister upon this theme. But an unlooked for termination of the sermon now occurred. Mr. Wedderburn again caught sight of Frances's face, framed by a background of darkness where the lights had been turned low. And he knew it again.

Freed from conventional surroundings, it was the child's face still. There were the pale, clearly-cut features with their pensive look, the large intelligent hazel eyes, rather deeply set, the soft locks of loose hair on the forehead, the curved mouth and strong, determined-looking chin. The truth flashed suddenly across Silas Wedderburn's mind. And he stopped short, in an agony of self-abasement and fear, which put an end to his eloquence as surely as a bomb-shell would have done.

He faltered, turned very white, and after one or two ineffectual attempts to proceed, he declared himself ill, and begged one of the deacons to bring the service to a close. Then he sat down in the pulpit, and put his face in his hands. Frances saw him no more.

She did not hear the hymn nor did she rise for it. She sat far back in the shadow, with her veil drawn over her face, hoping that no one could see the tears that came dropping one by one down her pale cheeks. But she did not cry because she was moved by tender memories of the

past, or hopes of a father's love. She wept to think that she had a father of whom she was ashamed.

She was still crying when she got into the brougham and found Dr. Fleming waiting for her. It was a relief to hear his cheery voice: it formed a wonderful contrast to the mellow, vibrating tones to which she had been listening, but she felt that the brusque accents covered a true heart. He did not attempt to conceal that he knew she was crying.

"Come, come," he said, "that place has been too much for you, dear. I don't wonder at it. The atmosphere is perfectly fetid: and Wedderburn has the reputation of upsetting women's nerves. Ah, you don't like me to say that, do you? I shall have to administer something out of my little case here, if you cry like that, you know. Yes, it is purely physical: I don't suppose you are under conviction of sin, as my friend Derrick would say. You must not go to these hot, crowded places any more. Mr. Derrick is really very ill: I begin to wish that Andrew were at home."

And so on, until he had talked the girl into a quieter state, in which she was quite ready to be kissed and caressed by Chloe and her mother, and put to bed with not even one reproachful "I told you so!"

But she clung repentantly to Mrs. Fleming as she said good-night, and tried to stammer out something like an apology, "I am very sorry I went," she said, "and I think you were quite right to advise me not to go. But I had to go. I can't tell you why."

"Never mind, my dear: go to sleep and forget it all," said Mrs. Fleming, too compassionate to maintain her anger for one moment at the sight of so much grief.

"I shall never forget it;" was the somewhat bewildering response, and Frances spent the night in dreaming of the well-known face, the well-known accents of her father as he preached unending sermons to countless congregations, to all eternity.

She was very much ashamed of her own emotions next morning, but as nobody alluded to them she did her best to forget them all. A half-formed project which had previously floated vaguely through her mind, now, however, took form and shape. She was resolved to see her father, to speak to him, if only to beg him not to divulge the relationship. And for that purpose she must go to Rushton by herself and call at the minister's house.

Chance favored her. She drove with Mrs. Fleming to Rushton and was left at the doctor's old house while Mrs. Fleming went to see a friend. She had fully an hour to spare. And so it came that one afternoon in the week after the Sunday, when she had heard her father preach, she found herself knocking at her father's door.

## CHAPTER XXV.

## FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

Mr. Wedderburn did not look as though he were prepared for a visitor. In fact Frances had some difficulty in obtaining admission, for Miss Wedderburn was out, and the maid had received orders to let no one enter. By dint of mingled persuasion and firmness, however, Frances got inside the house, and then, having asked for the door of the study, she boldly knocked and entered. Jane was left feebly protesting that it wasn't her doing, and that she never dared to go against Miss Wedderburn's orders, but by that time Frances had closed the door. And a querulous voice came out of the dimness saying:

"Who is it? What do you want?"

Frances stood for a moment in amazed and gathering concern. Her father must be very ill, she thought, to nurse himself in this way. She had grown accustomed to men who liked out-door exercise, who did not care very much whether it were wet or fine, who despised small ailments and did not know what a headache meant. Hence her surprise when she found her father, who certainly looked big and strong even if he were a trifle too fleshy and too pale, lying back in a great arm-chair with his feet supported by a high foot-stool and covered with a soft rug; a smell of eau-de-cologne and other medicaments in the air: the window blinds drawn, and a fire in the grate making the room unduly warm for the time of year. Outside, the spring sun was shining, the spring breeze blowing and the gardens were gay with daffodils, and the orchards with blossoming trees. It struck Frances that, unless a man were really ill, it would be more wholesome to go out in



the fresh air and sunshine, rather than bask over the fire in a luxurious arm-chair.

"I beg your pardon," she said, her clear sweet voice penetrating the heavy air like a sunbeam sword from the world outside. "I did not know that you were indisposed. Your servant told me that you were busy. And as my business is—perhaps—important, too, I thought that I had better walk straight in."

Mr. Wedderburn had struggled to his feet by this time, divesting himself as well as he could of the soft rug that Lavinia had tucked round his legs, and revealing the fact that he was clad in an elaborately quilted dressing-gown lined with cherry-colored satin, and that his feet were thrust into worked slippers which were only too evidently the gift of some "lady of the congregation." He had a beard, and did not exhibit the uncared-for appearance of men who omit to shave, but he had also an untidy and ruffled look, as of one whose toilet had been slurred over as much as possible that morning.

"I am very sorry," he said, his eyes not distinguishing the face and figure of Frances, for she wore a hat that came rather far over her eyes and a thick veil—precautions against recognition which she had deemed it best to take, and which quite concealed her identity from Mr. Wedderburn: "I am very sorry that you should find me in this state. A severe nervous headache to which I am subject caused my cousin to persuade me to take a nap—not that I am in the habit of sleeping in the afternoon—"

There was a slightly annoyed tone in his voice, which led Frances to say quickly:

"There is no need for you to mind my seeing you, or knowing that you were taking a rest. Don't you remember me? I thought that you remembered me last night. I hardly thought that any further introduction would be necessary. In fact I imagined—" and she looked down as she spoke—"that you would be expecting me."

"My child!" said Mr. Wedderburn, with a start. He

opened his arms wide and seemed to expect that Frances would run into them. But she remained standing beside the table, and he was obliged to let them fall again. "My child! Is it indeed my child?"

"It is Frances," said the girl, shortly. "I do not know whether you have forgotten my name."

"Forgotten!" He made a quick step towards her, but again stopped short, breathing heavily as though he were much agitated. "Could I ever forget my own child? My little Frances?"

"Not very little now, I am afraid," said Frances, with something like a smile in her voice. "Shall I draw up the blind a little way? You cannot see me in this light, and I cannot see you."

Mr. Wedderburn would have demurred if he could, but the wonderfully quiet and self-possessed manner of the girl took away from him all power of opposition. He was not very well pleased when a flooding light revealed his dressing-gown, his slippers, his cup of tea at one elbow, a brandy flask beside it: the room, he felt, was dirty and untidy, and he himself not quite equal to the occasion. He protested a little, in a weak, ineffective fashion.

"If you would step into the drawing-room for a moment," he said, "I would just put on my coat and come to you there. This room is my own particular den: it is not a fit place in which to receive ladies."

"I should not think that I count as a 'lady,'" said Frances. "When your own daughter comes to see you, is it necessary to receive her in the drawing-room? And I have only a few minutes to spare: I think it would be better not to waste them."

She put up her veil and let him see her face, which was rather pale just then, with a somewhat scornful curve of the beautiful lips. She looked very handsome, as Silas realized with a sudden contraction of the heart, exceedingly out of place in his study. Her dress was simple, but it was perfectly made; and to Mr. Wedderburn, who did not

understand the force of details, it seemed superb. His little Frances, as he called her, had passed out of his sphere. But he tried to regain his failing courage and to claim a father's rights.

"You are my daughter, then?" he said. "My daughter, back from the dead—whom I never expected to see again. When I caught sight of your face last night, it seemed to me as though one had risen from the grave. Come, my child, you have not yet greeted me: come, let me kiss you and thank God that you have returned to me from the dead."

Frances shivered slightly, but advanced towards him and allowed him to kiss her forehead and to hold her hand. He placed her in a chair beside him, and sank once more into his own luxurious lounge—a small thing, but one which his daughter could not help thinking characteristic; Laurence would not have been content until she was installed in the best seat in the room. But her father thought it quite natural that he should sink into those cushioned depths and hold her hand, while she sat upright on an uncomfortable cane bottomed chair at his side. She said to herself with some confusion that she supposed she had forgotten how to behave like anyone's "little girl." Yet this was what her father was now calling her.

"Well, my little girl," he was saying, "and what providential concurrence of circumstances have brought you into this part of the world? You knew my name, of course, and sought me out? But—is it not some time since I caught a glimpse of you in Rushton? I thought then that it was a chance resemblance, but I must say that it upset me very much. And last night was quite too much for me—quite too much. But we will not speak of that. I saw you, I think, with one of the neighboring gentlemen of this place—Mr. Corbet, I think, is his name—"

"Yes, and I go by his name," said Frances, "I am called Frances Corbet now. I used to see Miss Wedderburn very often at Miss Kettlewell's, but she did not remember me."

Silas's brow darkened. "My dear child! 'Miss Wedderburn!' That has a curious sound from your lips. Surely you recollect your cousin Lavinia?"

"I recollect that I disliked her very much," said Frances, with composure, "and that I was very much afraid of her. Now, of course, I am not afraid; but I dislike her as much as ever."

Mr. Wedderburn prudently shelved the question.

"And how is it," he said softly, "that you have been so mercifully preserved until this day? Where have you been in the interval since we parted?"

"Do you not remember Mr. Corbet?" said Frances, looking at him. "Do you not remember the gentleman on board the Attaman who was talking to us when we first heard the alarm of fire, and took care of me afterwards when—when you—deserted me?"

She spoke deliberately, still looking him full in the face. Her hand had lain in his until now; but he dropped it at once and started up, moved out of all exterior calm by the accusation she brought against him.

"How dare you speak to me in that way?" he said. "You—my daughter? A mere child at the time. What could you know of my actions or the reasons for them? You give an odious turn to your allusions, and one which is utterly unjustifiable."

"I was a child—that is true," answered Frances. "But I remember every detail of the scene. And Mr. Corbet stood by and heard and saw it all. But for him I should have been left on the burning steamer and died a miserable death."

"He says so, no doubt," said Silas Wedderburn, sinking down again into his chair. Crouched together in shame and dismay, trembling from head to foot, he looked a mere mountain of quivering flesh, without manliness or courage in its composition. Frances looked at him strangely, but listened while he spoke with the rancor of a small-minded

man. "He says so; he has made you believe me a monster, I have no doubt; he has made you think him a hero, while I am left out in the cold!"

"He risked death for me: I know that now, though I did not quite know it then," said Frances. "You can scarcely say that you did that."

"I did more," said the man, drawing himself up into some semblance of dignity and self-respect, "I sacrificed my daughter to the claim of duty. Like another Iphigenia she should honor the father who would do so much for the cause he loved."

Frances looked at him with surprise. "Was it so necessary for your cause that you should be saved?"

"Absolutely necessary. At least I thought so then. As it happens, Providence decreed that my plans fell to the ground. But if they had been carried out—and I had no reason then to suppose that they would not be—it would have been seen that I was right in saving myself and my papers at all costs."

"I can understand that, in some cases," said his daughter meditatively. "Some men might well think their own lives more valuable than that of a child. Perhaps you did. Perhaps you were right. But oh, no, I can't feel that it was right," she said, with sudden heat. "It is hard to say so of myself, but father, you should have given me the chance of life with you. You took my place—a child's place—in the boat. You do not expect me to have much regard for you after that?"

"I had hoped that you—you would have understood," said the man, bending his head under her reproaches, but speaking with a touch of sullenness. "I see that he—Mr. Corbet—has done his best to maintain a grudge against me—"

"It is no grudge," said Frances quickly, "but it has been a bitterness to me all my life, to think that a stranger should be willing to peril his life for me, when my father would

not. Sometimes I have been sorry I lived to know it. And sometimes I have thought—and this is one reason why I wanted to see you to-day—that perhaps I was not your child, that you had only adopted me, perhaps, and did not feel towards me as fathers do feel for their children.... was it not so? I could forgive you for everything, if only I were not your own child.”

Silas shaded his eyes with his hand and rocked himself gently backwards and forwards. Perhaps there was a struggle in his mind. But if there were, it was truth that won the day.

“It is no use trying to get out of it in that way,” he said huskily. “I am your father—yes: and your mother is buried in Australia. I do not admit that I failed in my duty—no. It was a sacrifice, a great sacrifice—” his voice grew mellow and more unctuous as he spoke—“but one which I undertook at the voice of duty, and which, especially as you are safe, my dear Frances—I shall never regret.”

“I am glad you are satisfied with yourself,” said his daughter dryly. “What you say makes it all the easier for me to tell you why I came. I had heard of you at Rush-ton: I longed to speak to you, thinking I might perhaps obtain some explanation of what has troubled me all these years! I even wondered whether it was not my duty to give up my home at Mr. Corbet’s, and come back to you here. At last I thought that I would hear you preach—I thought—I could judge by that. And, as it happened, you chose to describe that terrible night of the shipwreck—the flames—the cries—the horror of it—oh, you did it well!” cried Frances, rising involuntarily to her feet, and clasping her hands. “There was only one detail which I found mistaken—the picture of yourself as the self-sacrificing minister of Christ, when I remembered you only as a selfish coward, trying to hustle women and children out of your way in order that you might save your own valuable life!”

She turned away from him and hid her face in her hands.

"How dare you preach in that way?" she said in a stifled voice. "Are you not afraid of bringing down God's judgment upon your head?"

"Frances! Frances! Is this the way you should speak to your father—your own father, erring though he may be?" said Silas Wedderburn. His face was pallid as ashes, and his hands shaking like aspen-leaves. Frances dashed down her hands and looked at him.

"No, it is not the way," she said, "and I am an undutiful daughter perhaps to say these things: but it is your fault, father, and not mine. If you had cared for me, I should have loved you, too. But I must tell you what I came for, I wish to say that I do not desire to be known by any name but that of Corbet: that I do not want to be called Wedderburn or to be known as a relation of yours. Nevertheless, I shall always be ready to do anything I can for you, if there is ever any occasion. I will even let you know where I am from time to time, if you care to hear."

"If my daughter does not choose to acknowledge me, we had better be strangers altogether," said Mr. Wedderburn, with his grandest air, and a wave of his white hand.

"Very well," said Frances. "It was only if you were ever in want of anything that I could give—I should always be ready then. But let me ask you one thing in return, father: don't preach about that shipwreck, don't make much of it in the pulpit again. To hear it almost makes me doubt the existence of an overruling Providence at all."

"Your feelings may be strong, but they need not find relief in blasphemy, my dear," said her father acidly, though with trembling lips. "But I will not preach on that subject again, although your preservation distinctly shows—"

"I don't care what it shows or not," said Frances, desperately, "I only know that I want never to hear of it again. Good-bye, father. I am sorry you do not understand me better. Some day, perhaps—" she spoke in a

half-hearted and discouraged manner, "some day you may be able to understand."

And then she left Silas Wedderburn to chew the cud of his own memories, and to console himself with the reflection that women were always narrow-minded and unjust.



## CHAPTER XXVI

## MISS WEDDERBURN'S ADVICE.

Miss Lavinia Wedderburn had gone out to tea. It was not often that she indulged in these festivities: she liked to keep an eye upon her cousin rather than to indulge in tea-parties with the old ladies of the congregation; but on this occasion she thought that Silas was safe. She had tucked him up with tender care in his own study: she had darkened the windows and provided him with eau-de-cologne and tea: and she had given strict orders that nobody was to be admitted: it was therefore with no little chagrin that she learned on her return home, that a young lady had been to see "master," and had remained with him in his study half an hour or more; and that she would not listen to Jane when Jane remonstrated, but had marched straight into master's study, as bold as brass, and as if no one would dare to say her nay.

Interrogated further, Jane acknowledged that the lady was very good-looking, and well-dressed, and that she had seen her in the town sometimes with Miss Fleming, but that she did not know her name. And that master had seemed very put out and queer like, when the visitor had departed, and had ordered the tea out of the room and gone up to dress, immediately. And he was still in his own room, she believed, but wasn't sure.

What had happened? Bitterly did Miss Wedderburn lament her own carelessness in going out to tea. She suspected every woman of her acquaintance of wishing to make love to Silas, and her mind fixed itself on a certain Miss Stevenson, who was slightly acquainted with the Flemings certainly, but who had distinguished herself lately by her extreme devotion to Mr. Wedderburn's chapel.

"Good-looking, indeed!" said Miss Wedderburn to herself with a toss of her head. "As good-looking as a Dutch doll, with her red cheeks and bold black eyes. If I had been at home I would have heard every word she had to say. I've no doubt she asked Silas to marry her."

Lavinia was dominated by two passions, her love for Silas, and her greed of gold. It would have been difficult to say which ruled her more completely, sometimes it seemed as though one preponderated, sometimes the other. But her determination to marry Silas was laying a great hold upon her, and might in time possibly supersede the other. At present she thought of nothing else and her heart was hot within her when she reflected on "the chances" that her absence had given to Maria Stevenson. She went into the study and seated herself, resolving to wait until Silas came down.

When he appeared, his aspect was so much changed, that she said at once that something unusual had occurred. She had left him half asleep, unwashed, unbrushed in his comfortable dressing gown and slippers, with a bottle beside him, which she did not think that he would neglect, and a hazy intention of slumbering the afternoon away. She saw him now, erect, clean, "well-groomed," in the most clerical attire possible, with snowy linen, and gold chain conspicuous on his black waist-coat. Miss Wedderburn's heart gave a sudden throb of fear. Had Maria proposed?—and had Silas accepted the proposal?

"I am glad to see you so much better," she said, in a tone that savored of offence rather than of gladness.

"Yes, I am better." Frances's visit had acted on Silas as a tonic: he looked round him discontentedly. "Why does not Jane make the room a little tidier? She ought to have brushed up the ashes after dinner and opened the window. The atmosphere is intolerable."

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Miss Wedderburn, as her cousin stalked to the window and impatiently flung it open. "This is a change indeed. Why, when I left you, you were

in a state of collapse, and declaring that you shivered with cold. What has worked this marvelous cure, Silas? Your visitor?"

"My visitor?" said Silas, suddenly facing her.

"Jane told me," said Lavinia, sitting very erect, with her hands folded before her in her lap. "And I must say once for all, Silas, that I think it very improper for you to receive ladies—especially rather young ladies—in your study when I am out. You don't set up to hear confessions, as they do in the Romish Church, that I am aware of! Why, then, should any respectable young person come to see you in your study when she can always ask for me, and generally find me at five o'clock in the drawing-room?"

"Lavinia, you do not understand."

"I understand quite enough. Whether it is Maria Stevenson or anybody else, I do not concern myself. It is decidedly wrong for you to receive any lady alone in that manner, Silas, and the deacons will be remonstrating with you if they get wind of it."

"It is not very likely that they will get wind of it," said Silas, turning his back upon her and looking out of the window. His cousin's voice grated upon his ears, on which Frances's refined and musical accents were vibrating still.

"Why not? And why do you turn your back upon me, Silas, unless you are ashamed to look me in the face? If Maria Stevenson—"

"It was not Maria Stevenson," said Silas, annoyed by the repetition of the name.

"Not! Who in the world was it, then?"

He paused a moment before he replied. "It was Miss Corbet," he said at length.

"Miss Corbet!"

Lavinia was for once taken by surprise. But she recovered herself almost instantly. A strange smile flitted over her pale face.

"Miss Corbet! And what did she want? Is she serious? Is she under conviction of sin? I saw her in chap-

el last night, Silas, listening most intently to your sermon. And crying afterwards: I am sure of that. Did she come to you about her soul? It would be splendid to get her over to the Connection, would it not?"

"I don't know why," said Mr. Wedderburn, in an annoyed tone. "She has no money that I know of—unless Corbet leaves her some, and she has no friends, no position—"

"What do you mean?" cried his cousin, with a note of wonder in her voice. "What do you know of her? Who is she? Has she told you her real name?"

"How do you know that Corbet is not her real name?"

"Oh, everybody knows it isn't," said Miss Wedderburn sharply. "I've heard Miss Kettlewell talk about it. Mad as she was, she knew people's genealogies pretty accurately. She always said that there was no existing Corbet who could have a daughter of that age, unless it were Laurence Corbet himself. And she always maintained that Frances was exactly like one of the dead and gone Hernesdales."

"There is no need for any speculation of that kind," said Silas loudly, as if determined to hear no more of it. "I can tell you who Frances Corbet is, Lavinia. She is my daughter."

He really thought that Lavinia would have had a fit. She turned deadly white, then red, then purple, then almost black, and, after the first gasp of astonishment, relieved her feelings by a great burst of hysterical laughter, ending in a sob. Silas Wedderburn gazed at her severely.

"Are you mad, Lavinia?" he asked.

"Mad! Mad!" cried Miss Wedderburn, wiping her eyes, "no, but all the world is mad, I think. Oh, if only I had known it a few months ago! Oh, me! Of all the remarkable things—"

"I must say that your emotion strikes me as rather ridiculous, Lavinia," said Mr. Wedderburn testily. "The thing is perfectly easy to understand."

"You are sure of it?" she said, clutching wildly at his

arm. "You are certain? There is no possibility of mistake?"

"Not at all. She came here and told me herself."

"But she might be an impostor. She might think she had something to gain," said Miss Wedderburn, cunningly.

"What should there be to gain? You are very unreasonable, Lavinia. Besides, I knew the girl at once, as soon as I had the clue. The reason why I turned faint in the pulpit last night was because I recognized her. I was thinking about the shipwreck, you know, and her face suddenly caught my eye. I must confess that I was disturbed. I thought for one foolish moment that it might be a spirit—coming back to—to reproach me—"

"Reproach you? What on earth for?"

"For—for leaving her, Lavinia. You know I made my escape—without my child. Not otherwise did I think I could do my duty to the Society which employed me. I did not think I ought to sacrifice the information, the influence, I had gained. Events proved that they did not stand me in much stead. But I did my duty—I did my duty, even though I had to leave my little child behind."

He shook his head and his dark eyes filled with tears. He firmly believed himself justified in having saved his own life from the burning Attaman. And Miss Wedderburn comforted him by taking precisely the same view of the situation.

"Of course you did your duty," she said, "and in a most exalted and heroic manner, Silas. But we must not expect our sacrifice to be always recognized by the outer world. A valuable life like yours had to be preserved at any cost. How did the child escape?"

Mr. Corbet was one of the passengers. He took charge of the child, and I knew she would be safe with him," said Silas, embroidering his narrative a little. "He had great influence with the captain and the crew; he was a man of large fortune, you see, and every effort would be made to save him; so I thought it the best thing in the world to

leave the child in his care. My judgment has been perfectly justified," said Silas, with an air of complacency.

"But afterwards?" urged Miss Wedderburn. "Didn't you know where he was to be found? Couldn't he have discovered you? How is it that you have never seen your daughter from that day to this?"

"He grew fond of her, I believe, and decided to adopt her," said Mr. Wedderburn, faltering a little. "And they have been very little in England. I must confess that I never associated Corbet of Denstone with the Mr. Corbet of the Attaman. But they might have found me if they had chosen."

"Of course they might. Then what brought the girl here? Had she a natural longing to see her relations? She never struck me as an affectionate girl. I used to think her very stiff and proud when I saw her at King's Leigh."

"She came because—well, it is rather difficult to say. She does not wish the relationship to be known."

"Oh, I daresay."

"And I must say, Lavinia, that to make it public at present would be to bring a great many difficulties upon me."

"In what way?" said Miss Wedderburn, with gleaming eyes.

"In many ways," said her cousin, impressively "If it were known that she was my daughter, I might be compelled to offer her a home. That would not suit me, Lavinia; it would not, I think, suit you."

"No," said Lavinia, after a moment's pause. "I must say it would not."

"We should bring Mr. Corbet's ill-will upon us also. He might furnish the congregation with a garbled version of the shipwreck story—"

"Ah, I understand," said Miss Wedderburn. "Yes, I remember how scared you were, Silas, when I alluded to that a little while ago. Your London Committee never pro-

fessed themselves satisfied on that point. They accused you of cowardice, did they not? Well, of course, I think you were perfectly right; but it would be awkward if the story were told from the wrong point of view."

Mr. Wedderburn writhed in his chair. "My conscience, Lavinia," he said, "my conscience acquits me—"

"It acquits you of a good many things that some people call a little queer, doesn't it?" said Miss Wedderburn. "But I did not mean to vex you, Silas. All I want to know is this; I do hope you parted on good terms with this girl?"

"Fairly," said Frances's father, in a dubious tone, "fairly. She does not wish to be known by the name of Wedderburn—"

"Ah, well, perhaps that is for the best, so long as Laurence Corbet doesn't tell. But I don't think he is anxious to have much to do with us."

"—And she offered to help me at any time, should I be in need—"

"You accepted the offer, of course?" said Miss Wedderburn, rising from her seat in gathering excitement.

"Well, no, Lavinia, I can't say that I did, exactly."

"Oh, you fool!" cried Lavinia, evidently quite beside herself with rage and disappointment. "Oh, you fool, you fool, you fool!"

"Lavinia!"

"You always were a fool and will continue one to the end of your days, Silas Wedderburn! Oh, if you only knew what you were flinging away—"

She stopped suddenly, shut her mouth tightly, and looked suspiciously at her cousin.

"I only mean," she said, in an entirely different tone of voice, "that Mr. Corbet is sure to provide for Frances and that it might be very convenient now and then to have a rich daughter to fall back upon. You will never make a fortune, Silas; your health is not good; you are in debt. You would have done well to tell Frances that you would

be most grateful for any help that she could afford you—especially now.”

“I—I do not understand you, Lavinia,” said Mr. Wedderburn, with an attempt at dignity. “It did not seem to me that I could accept—money—from a daughter who refused to bear my name. But of course there are circumstances—”

“In which she might be useful,” said Lavinia, briskly. “My dear Silas, I should advise that you write to her and say that you have reconsidered the position and would be very glad if she could accommodate you with two or three hundred pounds.”

“I am afraid I cannot do that,” faltered Mr. Wedderburn. But at the same moment, it flashed across his mind that he probably could—and would.



## CHAPTER XXVII

## MR. DERRICK ASKS QUESTIONS.

Frances rejoined Mrs. Fleming at the doctor's house, and was not surprised to find that her hostess regarded her with a little coldness after her solitary excursion into the town. But she was not in the mood to explain herself. She was feeling bitter and angry; and she had fully made up her mind that she would never acknowledge any relationship to the man whom she had scorned, the father whom she despised with her whole soul. She said to herself that if he had owned himself repentant for what he had done, she might have had some pity, some affection for him, but his self-satisfaction, his utter ignorance that he had acted basely, deprived her of all sympathy for him. She would do anything she could for him, if ever he asked her for help, but she would not live in his house, nor call him father, nor acknowledge any tie of obedience, much less of love.

And in this lonely mood of hers, her thoughts turned longingly to Laurence, who had been the friend of her childhood, the savior of her life at first, its guardian and protector ever afterwards. Who was like him in his gentleness, his loyalty, his manly strength and goodness! What a contrast he presented to this father of hers, who had cast her off like an old glove when she was in his way. She had never felt herself in Laurence's way; never thought for one moment that he grudged any sacrifice that he could make for her. She had accepted everything from him, almost as a matter of course. Now she began, in her new-found gratitude, to wish that she could recompense him in some way for the trouble and pains that he had so freely spent on her.

Well, there was one way. He had asked her to be his wife, and she had refused. She had never thought that she could refuse him anything he asked for, and yet she had rejected his proposal with positive anger and scorn. She began to be sorry for Laurence, and to wonder, a little tremulously and timidly, whether she had not been mistaken. Whether there could be anybody in the whole wide world who was half so dear as he. But she said not a word to anyone of her perplexities, her misgivings, her fears, she only grew a little graver, a little more silent and also a little thinner and paler from day to day; so that Dr. Fleming sometimes gave her a keen and rather serious look, and Mrs. Fleming wondered uneasily whether she had not something "on her mind." But Chloe was happy with her; there was some unexpressed affinity between the natures of the two girls which made them pleasant companions for one another, and Frances therefore remained at King's Leigh for a visit which was to be prolonged indefinitely. And Mrs. Fleming, knowing Laurence's sentiments, thought it far better that she should be at King's Leigh than at Denstone.

Silas Wedderburn was less self-satisfied than Frances thought him. There were certain prickings of conscience which he tried hard not to feel, and he had never been really comfortable in his mind about the child whom he had abandoned. He was relieved to find that she did not want him to acknowledge her; and he was distinctly puzzled by Lavinia's extraordinary excitement when she heard that Frances was his daughter. A suggestion made by Lavinia also bore fruit. Frances had promised to help him; probably she had means at her command: was he to be troubled and made miserable by his enemies when she, his daughter, could set everything right by a stroke of her pen?

He almost forgot that she was not of age, and would most likely have no authority over money that might one day be her own: she could at present be possessed only of

an allowance, and that, as far as he knew, might be small. But he heard on all hands of Mr. Corbet's liberality; and he inferred that Frances was treated as generously as everything and everybody else concerned with him.

He had some hesitation, however—and it was to his credit that he had—about asking his daughter for money. After all, as she had said, he had abandoned her upon the wreck, and he could not expect her to cherish any decided affection for him. It might seem, he acknowledged, rather mean, in fact, to ask her for money; but surely a daughter would forgive him for trespassing so far upon her kindness when it was a question of saving her father from—disgrace.

Yes, disgrace. The word was out now. He had spoken it to himself for the first time. He was within measurable distance of disgrace. And disgrace meant ruin: for his livelihood depended upon an unsullied reputation. If he were convicted of dishonesty, or even of culpable carelessness in handling money that was not his, he could look for no more popularity in Zion Lane. What would become of him if he could obtain no pastorate in any place? if his history debarred him from preaching those eloquent sermons for which his name was known?

And he had not meant to do anything wrong. He repeated it over and over to himself. He would not have robbed anybody for the world. He had only been a little unbusinesslike. The subscriptions to the chapel building fund had been coming in rather fast, and he had paid them in to his own account at the bank. Then a sudden need for money had arisen: a creditor had pressed him hard, and he had taken the money for his own use, intending of course to pay it back. But he could not pay it back until his next quarter's salary was paid; and that was not due till June. It would have been all right if old Matthew Derrick had not come along with his questions and his methodical old-fashioned notions about accounts, and asked him things he could not answer and requested him

to send a list of the subscriptions and to pay in the money to old Derrick's bank. What business had Derrick to want that money? It would not be required till the summer, and in summer Silas Wedderburn could pay it back. Why need anybody make a fuss? But he was uneasily conscious that Derrick was the very man to call such dealings by very ugly names.

The old man's attack of gout was quite a relief to Mr. Wedderburn's mind. The pain might possibly drive all remembrance of the chapel accounts out of his head. And when he was better, surely, Silas thought, he could put him off for a little while—gain time enough, perhaps, to borrow or beg the money that would put him right. Derrick would never think of accusing the minister of embezzlement.

He thought once of asking Lavinia to lend him the money. He wanted eighty pounds at least, and he knew that she had sums in the bank, as well as the annuity which Miss Kettlewell had bequeathed to her. But he could not bring himself to borrow from Lavinia. He felt sure that the debt would give her a hold over him, and that she would use her power. He knew that she wanted to marry him; and he had no desire now to marry her. If he confessed to her this little embarrassment of his about the funds, he certainly believed that she would threaten him with exposure unless he fixed the marriage day.

A few days after Frances's visit, a note from Mr. Derrick reached the minister. It contained a few lines only.

"Dear Mr. Wedderburn: Will you send me the list of subscriptions and pay over moneys, as soon as convenient? My gout is better and I am able to attend to business now. Hope to see you soon.

Yours very truly,  
Matthew Derrick."

"Nothing amiss there!" said Silas Wedderburn to him-

self. "I must answer the note, I suppose." And drawing a sheet of paper towards him he made reply at once.

"Dear Mr. Derrick: I am truly rejoiced to hear that you are recovering from your attack. I shall have pleasure in calling on you with the list at no very distant date. I should like to make up the subscriptions to a round sum before paying them into your bank. So many are so extremely small that they have not yet reached the amount that I hoped to hand you. I trust you have good news of your son.

Yours most faithfully,  
Silas Wedderburn."

He hesitated a little before penning the word "faithfully." Had he been faithful to his trust? And then he laughed at himself for his over-scrupulousness, and wrote the conclusion of his letter without a qualm. He had gained some days at least.

Mr. Derrick sent him no reply to his note. But it was with a sharp sensation of fear that Mr. Wedderburn saw him one day walk past his window, and heard him rap at the door. If he could have got out at the back door he would have done so. Unfortunately (he thought) Lavinia was at home, and she made haste to send Jane to the door. And when Jane had gone into the kitchen again (but this Mr. Wedderburn did not know) Lavinia shut herself softly into the linen cupboard.

Mr. Derrick was not looking well. He walked with a stick, and he had a troubled expression of face, as of a man in pain. Mr. Wedderburn condoled him on his illness, and hoped that he was not feeling its effects.

"Well, no, I don't know that I am," said Mr. Derrick, letting himself down into a chair with some difficulty, and leaning on his stick with both hands. "It's not that, exactly. It may be that I have something on my mind, Mr. Wedderburn, and don't quite know how to get rid of it."

"Indeed! I hope it's nothing serious," said the minister, in some inward perturbation.

"I hope not, I hope not. It would be a great blow to me if it was serious. But I cannot think it. I cannot think it, sir."

Silas did not speak. He began to perceive that Mr. Derrick was leading up to some communication which he found difficult to make.

"It's just a little mistake that has occurred," he said, "referring to those subscriptions paid into the building account—or rather, not paid into it as yet, but in your name at the bank. You seemed not to know exactly how much had been paid over to you. I know that ministers are not as a rule business men: I believe they very often don't keep accounts; and that may be all very well for themselves (though in my opinion it leads to Ruin!), but in church matters, sir, it behooves us to be careful. And I cannot deny that there is a little appearance of carelessness in this affair, Mr. Wedderburn."

"Indeed, sir!" was Wedderburn's response, in a much offended tone, "you will find no carelessness, I am certain, when I hand you the accounts."

"Well, I hope not—I hope not," said Mr. Derrick, with a specific air. "You haven't the accounts ready to hand to me at the present moment, have you?"

"I am afraid I have not," said Mr. Wedderburn, biting his lip. "They are not quite made out—"

"So that you don't know the exact amount?" asked the old man, looking at him queerly.

"Not precisely."

"But you can make an approximation, no doubt. Twenty, thirty, forty pounds, eh, Mr. Wedderburn?"

"Oh, yes, quite so."

"Quite forty pounds?"

"Yes."

"Yes, I should think so," said Derrick, "considering that Dr. Fleming gave twenty, which my son Andrew tells me

he handed to you the other day. You had forgotten that, I think, when you said that you would consult Mr. Alden?"

There was dead, blank silence. Silas Wedderburn knew quite well what had happened now. Matthew Derrick had detected him in a prevarication—almost a lie; and his suspicions as to Wedderburn's honesty were thoroughly aroused. Silas would have given anything to be able to speak, to refute the horrible accusation which confronted him in Matthew Derrick's eyes; but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and he could not speak a word.

The silence seemed to him to last an eternity. In reality it lasted only two minutes by the clock. Then Matthew Derrick spoke again.

"In that case, as you say you are sure there are forty pounds belonging to the building fund in your bank, Mr. Wedderburn, hadn't you better write me a cheque for that amount, and I'll take it round and cash it at once and transfer it to the chapel account? It will be better to do this, so that there may be no more mistakes."

Again that deadly silence. Wedderburn knew very well that his cheque would be dishonored. He had spent all the money in the bank. He made one last stand for respectability.

"I'm afraid I must send round for a new cheque book," he said, with a feeble smile. "I've come to an end of mine. I can send it you by post, Mr. Derrick."

"You can write it on a half sheet of paper, with a stamp, you know," said the miller, with a perfectly unmoved countenance. "It does just as well."

Then Silas Wedderburn very nearly gave way. He uttered a smothered exclamation—it sounded like "My God!"—and rose from his chair. For no apparent reason, he walked to the mantel-piece, leaned his arms upon it, and looked down into the fire. He did not know what to do. And he felt that his silence was self-revelation.

Mr. Derrick also said nothing for a minute or two. Then

he sighed—and the minister vaguely wondered why—sighed and moved uneasily in his chair.

"I do not wish to inconvenience you, Mr. Wedderburn," he said at last, in a grave voice that was not without kindness; "but I cannot too strongly impress upon you the necessity of regularity and accuracy in all business affairs. If you will send me the cheque and a full statement of accounts by Wednesday, I will take the matter as settled; but if there is any further postponement or—or excuse, I shall recommend a meeting of deacons and elders to be called to inquire into the affair. They would hardly approve of your methods of doing business, I'm afraid, Mr. Wedderburn."

Silas took his arms down from the mantel-piece and faced the old man with a long-drawn sigh, half of humiliation, half of relief. At least he had a respite. It was Friday now; he had till Wednesday to get the money. He would get it by Wednesday of course, and then old Derrick could not look at him with those doubtful, disapproving eyes.

"I shall send you all the accounts and the cheque by Wednesday, you may be sure, Mr. Derrick," he said almost cheerfully; and he pretended not to notice that the old man hobbled off without shaking hands, without a friendly word.



## CHAPTER XXVIII.

## A DIFFICULT POSITION.

"What a fool he is!" said Lavinia Wedderburn to herself. "Oh, what a fool!"

She had of course heard every word of the interview between her cousin and Mr. Derrick. And now she sat and meditated on the course that she should pursue.

No question as to the morality of Silas's proceedings entered her head. She did not trouble herself about such things. Silas had got himself into a scrape; how to get him out of it was her first consideration. She wanted to help him, but with his full recognition of the fact that she was helping him; she wanted, as she would have said, to get her money's worth. She had no desire to do good by stealth, even for her cousin's sake. But how could she help him in this strait, unless he applied to her and told her all. For she did not want to confess to him about the linen-cupboard window. If it were closed up, she would be deprived of a personal source of interest—and of information.

A little quiet questioning might do much. Miss Wedderburn was quite skilled in the art of putting the thumb-screw on Silas. She knew exactly when to turn it and when to refrain. She had always hitherto made him tell her in the long run—even if he refused at first—anything that she wanted to know.

It was at tea-time that she began her work. She had Silas all to herself then, and he could not get away. She noticed that he looked depressed.

"It was Mr. Derrick who came this morning, was it not, Silas?" she asked, as she handed him a cup of tea.

"Yes."

"I am so glad to see that he is better. But he was very lame; he must have wanted to see you very particularly."

"A little matter of chapel business," said Mr. Wedderburn lightly. He had made up his mind that he would not tell Lavinia—unless he was obliged.

"What a trouble all this building must be. You ought not to be bothered with it, Silas. Ministers are notoriously bad business men, as I am told," said Miss Wedderburn with her pleasantest smile, "and I am sure they ought not to have to meddle with such things."

"Yes, they are very troublesome," said her cousin, turning over the leaves of a book that lay beside his plate. Presently, without looking up, he said, "Do you know whether Francis has gone back to Denstone or if she is still at King's Leigh?"

"Oh, so that is his idea, is it?" said Lavinia to herself, quick to seize the indication of his thoughts. Aloud she answered, "I think she is at King's Leigh."

"I should rather like to see her again," said Silas, conversationally.

"I dare say she would come if you were to ask her."

"Perhaps I may."

Then silence reigned, and Miss Wedderburn raged inwardly. But she could say nothing more just then. Her opportunity came a little later when she had opened a local newspaper which lay upon the table.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed. "This is very sad."

"What is sad?"

"A young fellow in Jeffrey's shop—you know the shop, Silas; it is in the market-place—has been prosecuted for embezzlement. I remember him quite well—such a nice, respectable young man. What is embezzlement exactly, Silas? Is it stealing?"

There was a hot flush on Silas's face. "More like—misappropriation of funds. No doubt he intended to put the money back."

"Well, that doesn't seem such a terrible thing, does it?" remarked Miss Wedderburn innocently. "That was just what he meant to do, I see he says: he lost it at the races, and had not time to put it back before it was missed. To think of sending a man to prison for that. He has got six months."

Mr. Wedderburn suddenly rose and went to the door of the room. "No more tea, thank you, Lavinia. And—I am going to be very busy, so you need not disturb me in the study. I shall not want any supper."

"Are you going to prepare your sermon?" said Miss Wedderburn. "Shall you make any allusion to George Fry's case, Silas? You might speak to the young people about it, and point out the evils of dishonesty, might you not?"

To this question, Mr. Wedderburn returned no answer, but went across the hall to his study, where he locked himself in.

"He does not mean to tell me," said Lavinia. "What an idiot he is! He is going to tell Frances, who very likely hasn't got any money at all to give away. Will he tell her the truth or only half of it, I wonder! And to think that he might have it for the asking, if he would only carry out his promise to me in return! I have half a mind to tell him outright that I know, and prevent him from making a fool of himself to Frances and killing the goose that will lay golden eggs by and by. He does not know what I know about that girl's future. If I had had any idea as to who she was, I don't think I would have kept her out of the money all this time. I shall not wait much longer now. A nice downfall for the Flemings it will be.

"As for Silas, if he chooses to apply to Frances rather than to me, he will have to settle with me afterwards, that is all. I have no patience with a man who absolutely refuses to act for the best. Silas is worse than a child."

Meanwhile Silas was absorbed in the composition of a

peculiarly difficult letter, which he afterwards addressed to Miss Frances Corbet at King's Leigh. The last version, after many unsuccessful attempts, ran as follows:

"My Dear Daughter,—

"You may be surprised to receive a letter from me, but your visit the other day which gave rise to so many pleasurable as well as painful emotions in my mind, has caused me to feel that I may confidently turn to you for help in a great emergency. I am in the deepest and most overwhelming anxiety; I have no one to consult, and am on the brink of ruin—of, perhaps, what is worse than ruin. I entreat you to come to see me once again, and let me state my case to you. I believe that you can find a way of helping me.

"This is my last resource. If no help can be found, I must leave Rushton for ever, or even put an end to my misery in some other way. For your mother's sake, do not abandon me. Come to-morrow, if you can—if not to-morrow, on Sunday afternoon, or Monday morning. Later, I am afraid, will be too late.

Your ever loving father,

"S. W."

He would not write his name in full. Who could tell whether accident might not lead to the placing of that letter in other hands? He would not commit himself so far as to write his name.

He went out before ten o'clock and posted the letter with his own hands. Lavinia saw him go, knew whither he went, and fumed at her own inability to win his confidence. "But I will be even with him yet," she said to herself irately. "He shall know where to go for help another time. What good will she do him, a ridiculous chit, living on Laurence Corbet's bounty, without a penny of her own!"

Mr. Wedderburn's letter was delivered to Frances about eight o'clock on the Saturday morning. It came up to

her room with her tea, and she opened it while she was still in her dressing-gown. Her father would have been hurt if he could have seen her when she had read the letter. She laid it down and laughed—not hysterically—but with real amusement, mingled with scorn. “He asks me not to abandon him—for my mother’s sake!” she said to herself. “Did he think of my mother when we were on the ship? However, I’ve made up my mind not to think of that incident any longer. What can he want to ask me? I have no means of helping him! And it is difficult to go to his house without astonishing the Flemings.”

She came at last to the conclusion that she would try and enlist Dr. Fleming’s services. She knew that he was very genial, very wide-minded, and she thought that he would help her if she appealed to him. So, after breakfast, she joined him as he walked up and down the terrace with a pipe in his mouth; and looked at him so intently for a minute or two that he smiled.

“What is the matter?” he said. “I’m beginning to know that look of yours now, Miss Frances. What mischief do you wish me to aid and abet you in now?”

“Nothing very serious, if only I could tell you what it was,” said Frances.

“That sounds mysterious.”

“I want you to do something for me without asking why. Will you offer me a seat in your brougham when you go out this morning? I want to go to Rushton, and I very much want to go alone.”

“Eh? Would Chloe be in your way?”

“I am afraid she would,” said Frances, quite simply. “It is nothing wrong, Dr. Fleming, indeed it is not.”

“I am sure of that,” he answered kindly; “but it may not be very wise.”

“I am not certain that it is very wise. But it is a duty—or perhaps a kindness—I am not sure which. And at any rate, no harm can come of it. I have some shopping to do in Rushton, too.”

"This sounds quite like a conspiracy. Frances, has it anything to do with the man whose chapel you went to—Wedderburn?"

No answer in words came, but Frances's face flushed crimson.

"I am not sure then that I ought to help you. I cannot imagine what you can have to do with a man of that kind. Is it some case of charity? If so, you had better take my wife along with you."

"I don't know what to say or what to do," said Frances. "I thought you would help me."

"I should be very glad if I thought you were acting wisely. But you say yourself that it is rather a foolish errand. Now tell me honestly, do you think that Laurence Corbet would approve of it? He is your guardian, and you are bound to think of his wishes. Would he like this expedition, or would he not?"

"He would not."

"Then, my dear girl, I don't see that I ought to help you."

Frances stood irresolute, her color coming and going, the tears rising to her eyes.

"I see," she said in a low tone at last, "that I am not a fit person to have come into your family—unless you had known all about me first. I must tell you now; I can't bear to let you have this false impression about me. This Mr. Wedderburn—"

"Yes?" said Dr. Fleming, rather dryly. He was quite prepared to hear that Frances wanted to marry him. He was not at all prepared for the words she spoke.

"Mr. Wedderburn," she said firmly, yet with difficulty, as if she scarcely knew how to utter the words distinctly, "Mr. Wedderburn is my father."

"What!" cried the doctor. He faced her with an expression of utter incredulity. "You are dreaming, Frances. You are not that man's daughter, surely?"

"Yes. When the Attaman was burnt, I was with him

—a child of nine years old. Mr. Corbet took charge of me; we were divided, and Mr. Corbet, hearing no news of my father, resolved to adopt me.”

“My poor girl!” said the doctor. “And did you not know that he was here?”

“Not till after we came. Then I wanted to see him and to hear him preach. And now he has asked me to go and see him for very special reasons. I don’t know what they are. And I don’t know how to go, unless you will help me. Perhaps I have no right to ask for your help. I know how you must dislike anyone connected with—Miss Wedderburn.”

“No such thing!” said the doctor cheerily. “I am not so unjust as that comes to. Well, my dear, I am glad you have told me. And I see no harm in your going to visit your father; but so long as people will gossip, you must be careful what you do. Now shall I tell my wife, or would you rather I did not?”

“I think—until I have seen Laurence again—I would rather tell nobody but you,” said Frances. And there was something in her eyes which seemed to Dr. Fleming infinitely sad.

“Go and get ready,” he said, pushing her from him with playfulness that was assumed to cover some sign of his own emotion; “I’ll make it all right with the missis, and the brougham will be at the door in ten minutes. Will that do?”

“I can never be grateful enough,” said Frances.

“Poor girl! she is in a very difficult position,” said the doctor, when he was left alone. “I wish I could tell Margaret—but perhaps she will let me do so when she has ‘seen Laurence’ as she expresses it and referred the matter to him. Daughter of Wedderburn! A pretty kettle of fish if Lady Hernesdale gets to know.”

And Dr. Fleming shrugged his shoulders as he prepared for the morning’s drive to Rushton.

## CHAPTER XXIX

## THE LAST PLEA.

This time Mr. Wedderburn was prepared for the coming of his daughter. When Dr. Fleming's brougham set her down at the little red-brick house, Silas was scrupulously dressed in his best clothes and ready to receive her at the door. He intercepted Miss Wedderburn and the wondering Jane, who wanted to look at her. Silas waved them back with his white, helpless-looking hand. "I will take Miss Corbet to the study, Lavinia," he said, with his most majestic air. "I wish to talk to her on a matter of business." And Miss Wedderburn retired, with the discomfited Jane, to the kitchen.

"That's the young lady as came the other day," Jane remarked. "I told you she was good-looking." Jane's manner was distinctly familiar. "You said you was sure she wasn't."

"I thought you meant someone else," said Miss Wedderburn. "I know Miss Corbet. If you had the sense to ask her to leave her name, I should have known whom you meant."

"Law, Miss, I shouldn't have known where to look—asking people their names, when they come to the house; they would say I was a rude thing," said Jane, whose acquaintance with the form of polite society was strictly limited.

"It is usual in the best houses," said Miss Wedderburn, loftily. "But that, Jane, nobody would expect you to know. You had better take your basket and go to the green-grocer's, we want vegetables for to-morrow."

"And leave you to prowl round the study door and listen to what's going on there," muttered Jane to herself,



but even she did not dare to say it aloud. She put on her hat and shawl and took up her market basket with a jerk; and when she was fairly out of the house, Miss Wedderburn entered the linen-cupboard.

And here she discovered something which filled her with dismay. The hole in the wall had been carefully covered over with boards nailed down tight and fast. Somebody—Silas, probably—had noted the aperture and taken pains to prevent its being used against his privacy. Not a sound from the study could penetrate the linen-cupboard where Miss Wedderburn stood.

It would be difficult to describe the storm of anger which arose in Lavinia's breast when she made this discovery. Evidently Silas had suspected her. And also he had not confided in her about Mr. Derrick and the chapel-money. He was going to confide in Frances instead of in her, was he? But he did not know what it would be to have Lavinia Wedderburn for an enemy, and not a friend!

Oh, she would give him up altogether. If he chose to marry her, he should have his chance. She had always wanted to be Silas Wedderburn's wife. If he would trust her, and confide in her, and tell her everything, she would still marry him and make him a good wife; but otherwise, she would make him suffer for his broken faith with her. For he had promised to marry her soon after he came to Rushton; and it pleased Lavinia to believe that it was she and not Silas who had delayed the marriage. Now it seemed as if Silas were holding back. It made her furious to think that he was telling his daughter of his difficulties when he had not told them to her. And it was maddening that she could not hear what father and daughter said. She went into the little drawing room and sat there with the door open—to wait until Frances should come out—waited, grim and unscrutable as Fate, with her hands crossed upon her knees and her eyes looking straight before her, yet seeing nothing as they looked.

Mr. Wedderburn received his daughter with a sort of

deference which Frances did not altogether appreciate. She was impatient of it, as she was still bitter and impatient with him. She noticed the change in his dress and the scrupulous neatness of his study, but it seemed to her as if the improvements were made for the sake of effect and they produced no impression upon her. She was hard on her father—it could not be denied that she was hard; but perhaps she had some reason after all. Silas Wedderburn had not been a good father to her.

"I have come because you wished to see me," she began. "But I am afraid I can be of no use to you."

She was standing by the table as she spoke, but she accepted the chair that he offered her. He drew another to the table, so they sat near each other. It was not impossible that he suspected Lavinia of listening at the door.

"I appreciate your kindness, your feeling for your father," Mr. Wedderburn said, with emotion. "I was sure that your heart would plead for me. I was sure that you would be ready to do all that you could for me."

"Only I am afraid I can do nothing."

"Ah, my child, what seems nothing to you in your splendid circumstances is often a great deal to a poor man like me. No doubt you spend as much on dress and trinkets as I have for my whole income."

His eye fell upon a gold bracelet that Frances was wearing, and Frances saw that it did so. She felt vexed and exasperated.

"You are very much mistaken," she said. "Mr. Corbet has always given me my dress and ornaments and paid for them himself. I have an allowance, of course; it is ample, but it is not such a great one as you seem to think. I have forty pounds a year for myself, if you like to know the amount."

"I did not wish to offend you, or to hurt your feelings, my child," said Mr. Wedderburn. Frances wished that he would not say "my child." It sounded too patronizing under the circumstances. Legally she was his child; but in no other sense.

"I wanted to tell you," said Silas, in a rather altered voice, "of the difficulties that I am in just now. Money difficulties, I mean. No doubt you hardly understand the significance of money difficulties. You have been secured against them for the last few years. But your father, Frances, is in need, in dire need, of money; and it is because he thinks that you may possibly help him that he has applied to you."

"It is of no use," said Frances, with a little added color in her cheeks. She remembered what Laurence had said to her on the very subject. She had not then thought it possible that her father would ask her for a gift. But she had been mistaken, and Laurence had been quite right. "I wish I could help you, I do indeed; but I have no money of my own, except ten pounds, and that would not be much use, would it? but you can have the ten pounds if you like; and there are my ornaments, but I don't suppose they would sell for very much."

"No, my dear, no," said her father. "I hope you do not think that I would impoverish you in that way. I had something quite different in my mind. I am, as I have told you, in great distress for money. I cannot put it too strongly; I am in great need, great distress. I want close upon a hundred pounds to set me right. It will not relieve me from much anxiety and inconvenience, but it will at least preserve me from—ruin. Do you want to see your father utterly ruined for lack of a hundred pounds?"

"Of course I do not," said Frances impatiently. "If I had the hundred pounds you should have it in a moment. But what is the use of asking me?"

"There is this use," said Mr. Wedderburn, moistening his dry lips with his tongue to give himself the power of speech, for he was excessively nervous, "that you are constantly in communication with persons who are rich in this world's goods, who have a regard for you and would help you if they knew that you required a loan."

"That I required it?" said Frances. "But I do not require it; I could not tell them that. Besides, in any case, I could not ask them for a loan."

His eye fell before hers; his fingers twitched uneasily. Evidently Frances was a difficult girl to move. But he hoped yet to induce her to listen to his plea.

"I should perhaps not have said that you required it," he began again, a little falteringly. "But I thought that there would be no harm in your going—frankly and openly—to Mr. Corbet and saying to him that your father was in straitened circumstances and that you wished to assist him. Mr. Corbet is a generous man; his behavior to you has proved that; and I am sure he would not refuse to lend me, through you, the sum of one hundred pounds. I feel certain that he would not refuse."

"Yes," said Frances, after a moment's pause. "I also feel sure that he would not refuse." Then, after an instant of silence, she added, in a deeper tone, "But I should despise myself if I gave him the opportunity of lending you money. I shall never ask him for a penny—either for you or for myself."

"Your scruples are very honorable to you," said Mr. Wedderburn, with a touch of sarcasm in his tone, "but I think that you might be justified in sacrificing a scruple or two for your father's sake."

"My father's sake? He has done so much for me!"

"My conduct," said her father, "has nothing to do with the matter. You are my daughter, whether you approve of me or not. The question is whether you will try to help your father at the hour of his need or whether you will not."

"Not in that way!"

"And why not in that way? It is straightforward and honorable enough. Tell Mr. Corbet that I will repay him next year, or by instalments; I will give any interest he likes. It is a pressing need—a very pressing need. Tell him this, and he will understand better than you can do. Girls do not understand business matters; they underrate

the importance of wealth. It would cost Mr. Corbet nothing to assist me; it is a matter of life or death to me."

He was becoming agitated. He had counted on Frances's readiness to help him. Now that she was proving herself so resolutely set against his proposal, he began to feel afraid.

"I cannot ask Mr. Corbet," she said. Her voice trembled as she went on. "Can you not understand how painful it would be to me to ask him for money—either for myself or you? He has taken charge of me all these years; he has educated me; the very clothes on my back are paid for by him—because you—you, my father, deserted me when I was a child. What right have you to expect help from him? Do you not know—can't you guess—what he thinks of you already? Would you have me lessen his respect for you by going to him with a request for money to pay your debts? Oh, it is intolerable—shameful! I wish I had never come to you at all."

She buried her face in her hands, and burst into tears. Mr. Wedderburn rose and turned his back on her. If she had looked at him she would have seen that his hands were trembling as he fingered the ornament on the mantelpiece without knowing what he did. But when she had dried her eyes, he turned round and spoke again.

"I see," he said, "that your mind has been poisoned against your father, and you do not care what becomes of him, whether he lives or dies, whether he is a ruined or a prosperous man!"

"I do care," said Frances, "but I cannot—I cannot—go to Mr. Corbet on your behalf." She stood up, as if to go.

"You have other friends," said Silas tentatively. "There are the Miss Flemings—"

"It is quite impossible," she answered, turning towards the door.

Then Mr. Wedderburn realized that he had failed. For

a moment his strength gave way; he sank into the nearest chair and covered his face with his hand. "Good God!" he murmured. "I am heavily punished for the wrong I did my child!"

It was a perfectly sincere exclamation. Perhaps for the first time Silas Wedderburn saw his own conduct in its true light. Nothing could have brought it home to him so much as Frances's refusal to bestir herself on his behalf, and her hint respecting Mr. Corbet's opinion of him. Like most men of great vanity, his self-respect varied with the respect of others. And at that moment, his daughter's contempt made him ashamed of himself.

Frances paused. She could not hear the ejaculation without being slightly moved by it. She saw the ashy color of his lips, the tremulous motion of his hands, and for the moment she hesitated. The woman who hesitates is lost.

"Why," she said, "should you want this money all at once? If I was to send you a little—now and then, could you not pay off your debt by instalments? You could not be ruined—surely—for a hundred pounds."

There was wonder and bewilderment in her voice.

"Ruin!" Silas Wedderburn cried. "You do not know what ruin means! By ruin I mean something worse than loss of money, failure, bankruptcy even—I mean disgrace."

"Disgrace!" she echoed drearily.

"You will hear of me as dragged off to prison, Frances. You will hear of me as a felon. Then perhaps I shall be punished enough."

She stood perfectly still. Twice she tried to speak and failed. When at last she could find voice, she said hoarsely,

"You have been dishonest? Is that what you mean?"

"I swear I never meant to be dishonest," said Silas Wedderburn, bowing his head before her. "I used it—some money, given for our building fund—I meant to pay it

back again. Derrick suspects—I shall be ruined if he finds it out. I have promised to send him the full amount by Wednesday, and I have nothing—nothing left. You were my sole hope; and—have failed me!”

“If he finds out,” said Frances, “tell me—what will he do?”

“He has threatened already to call a meeting; he will ask questions and expose me. I shall be prosecuted—and sent to——”

He could not say the word, but Frances understood the rest.

“Yes,” she said slowly, after a little pause, “disgrace is worse than ruin—worse than death. Yet I—I thought I should feel disgraced if I asked Laurence Corbet for money. What am I that I should mind? I am this man’s daughter, I partake of his nature, perhaps, I am cast in the same mold!” Then she clasped her hands together, and drew herself up to her full height.

“No, not that!” she said, in a louder tone. “No, I am not at least content in degradation and disgrace!”

Her father heard her, but did not understand the course her mind was taking. She had perceived instinctively that it was not the wrong-doing that troubled him, but only the punishment. It was public disgrace he feared, not the disgrace of sin.

She drew herself away from him, and spoke calmly.

“I did not know at first,” she said, “what necessity there was for money; I see things differently now. I would do a great deal, father, to save you from what you fear. I will go to Mr. Corbet—for your sake. Don’t thank me, don’t touch me; I can’t bear anything more just now. You want one hundred pounds, do you not? Well, you shall have it before night.”

Then she walked out of the room and out of the house, without glancing once more at her father’s piteous eyes and shaking hands, or even noticing Lavinia Wedderburn’s figure at the door.

## CHAPTER XXX.

## ONE HUNDRED POUNDS.

Frances could be very business-like when she chose. She walked straight to the White Hart, which was the good old-fashioned inn possessed by Rushton, and much preferred by County people to the numerous hotels which were springing up here and there, and ordered a fly for herself. In the sitting-room which she asked for she then pencilled a note to Dr. Fleming, telling him that she had gone to Denstone to see her guardian. She knew that he would approve of this step, and she depended upon him to explain matters to his wife and daughter. She should probably return to King's Leigh before night; and if they thought her proceedings very unaccountable they must forgive her and let her go.

She despatched this note by special messenger to the doctor's house. When the fly was ready, she stepped into it and told the driver to make the best of his way to Denstone. The landlady begged her to take some lunch—even to drink a glass of wine and eat a biscuit; but Frances felt as if food would choke her, and refused everything. Her appetite was gone, her remembrance of ordinary hours and times and seasons was gone, she only knew that she must get to Denstone as quickly as possible, and interview Mr. Corbet. It did not occur to her that she would arrive when he was at luncheon, but such was actually the case. And hearing the wheels and Frances's voice, he was out on the steps almost before she had left the lumbering vehicle in which she had arrived.

"Well, this is an unexpected pleasure!" he said, taking both her hands, and looking down into her face with a radiant satisfaction from which she involuntarily shrank. "You're just in time for luncheon. Tell the man to go



round and get something to eat and drink, Williams. Do you want to keep the fly, Frances?"

"Yes, I do," said Frances.

"Very well; he can put up the horse for the present." Then he gave her a keen look, as he led her across the hall to the dining room, "no bad news, I hope?" he said in her ear.

"Yes," she answered bitterly. "Very bad news."

"Good heavens! What has happened?"

"Oh, never mind. It will keep till after luncheon. Bad news will always keep," said Frances resolutely. She walked into the dining-room, kissed Mrs. Lester, and sat down to the luncheon table as if she had never been away. In order to avoid remark, she accepted the cutlet that was brought to her; but Laurence noticed that she ate nothing and that she was—in his eyes—horribly, unaccountably pale.

He sat looking at her and running over in his mind all the things that could possibly have happened; but of course he did not come near the right solution of the mystery. When he saw that she refused to eat anything more, he became extremely anxious to have a private interview with her, and rather snubbed Mrs. Lester who wanted to hear some gossip about the Flemings. Presently he started up.

"I am going into the library," he said, "if you have any business to discuss with me, Frances, I am at your service any time this afternoon."

"Thank you. I will come now if Mrs. Lester will excuse me. I came over on purpose to—to consult Mr. Corbet," she added to that lady, mindful of her feelings and of the conventionalities. "I shall see you later on."

"And now, what is it?" said Laurence, when he had installed her in the easiest chair the library afforded, and brought her cushions for her head and a footstool for her feet. "Let me know this instant; for I am sure it is only a misfortune that would make you look so pale. Is the

sunshine in your eyes? I'll alter the curtain—that is it. And are you comfortable? or would you like a—a scent bottle or anything—”

“Don't, Laurence,” said Frances, and turned away her head. He had been trying to make her smile by his attentions, but now he saw that it would be difficult to obtain a smile from Frances that afternoon. And he could not imagine why.

“My dear,” he said, in an utterly altered tone, “you know it is the one desire of my heart to serve and help you. Can I do anything for you?”

“I suppose you can,” she said, sitting up and recklessly destroying the elaborate erection of cushions which he had constructed. “At least that is what I have come to you to do. And I would die sooner than ask.”

“Is it so bad as that? My poor Frank! But don't you know that it is my greatest delight in the world to help you? Tell me what you want, and you may rest certain that if I can get it for you, you shall have it.”

He watched her. She seemed to be making up her mind for a supreme effort. She clasped her hands tightly together; she grew red and then she grew pale. At last the words came.

“I want—a hundred pounds,” she said.

It was such an anti-climax, in Laurence's ideas, to her violent emotion, her pallor, her distress, that he almost laughed aloud.

“Well,” he said, “that's nothing very difficult or remarkable. Let me get out my cheque-book, and you shall have a cheque in two minutes. Or, as it is Saturday, and you can't get it cashed at the bank, perhaps you would prefer notes?”

There was a touch of amusement in his voice. And, as she did not answer, he ventured to lay his hand upon her shoulder.

“Dear Frank,” he said, “you don't mean that you think it a terrible thing to ask me for that?”

"I am not going to ask you for it at all," said Frances, trying to swallow down a sob, "as a gift, at any rate. I want it—in quite another way."

"As a loan, perhaps?" said Laurence carelessly. "All right. But why you should bother yourself over such a trifle I can't imagine."

He turned to the drawer in which he kept his cheque-book, as Frances knew, and was about to open it, when she said in a tone of agonized entreaty:

"Oh, Laurence, stop! Hear me first. It is not for myself—it is for my father."

The effect was instantaneous. Laurence's hand fell from the handle of the drawer. He turned his back to it and leaned against the table scrutinizing Frances attentively. The lines of his face hardened as he looked at her.

"I knew some mischief would come of your going to see him," he said after a short pause. "You will remember that I cautioned you, Frances. Particularly as regarded money. I think I was tolerably right in my estimation of Mr. Wedderburn's character. I must say he has lost no time."

"I know—I know all that you can say," Frances answered. "It is atrocious—abominable, and I shall never forgive myself for asking you; and yet I must. He—he is my father, after all."

"Poor little Frances!" said Laurence. He left the writing-table, and came up to her side, laying his hand tenderly on the bowed bronze head for a moment, and then letting it rest upon her shoulder. "What has he done to you to put you into such a state? Played on your generosity, I suppose, and made you feel yourself a brute because you live at Denstone while he has a little house in a narrow Rushton street—was that it? I thought you were more strong-minded, dear \* \* \* but after all, I don't like strong-minded women, and you are no doubt quite right to wish to help your father; but is it very wise do you think?"

"You are too kind to me," Frances murmured in a low

voice. "I know you won't be able henceforth to forget that I have asked you for money; you will associate me—with him—"

"Now you are talking nonsense, my dear. I associate you with nobody but yourself—and myself, perhaps. Tell me what you want, and let us pass on to pleasanter subjects."

"You said to me one day, that there was some money which you had already given me—oh, forgive me for speaking of it again!"

"Of course there is some money; six thousand pounds and interest ready for you when you are of age or want to be independent."

"Then—might I take a hundred pounds of that for my father?" said Frances eagerly. "I don't know how these things are arranged; but I thought that perhaps you could manage it for me."

"What does your father want it for?"

Frances turned scarlet and dropped her eyes.

"A good purpose?" said Laurence, regarding her attentively.

"Laurence, that is the worst of it. I can't tell you."

"Does that mean that you do not know?"

"Yes, I know; but—I cannot tell."

"I don't quite like that, Frances. Why should you spend a hundred pounds either of your money or mine, on an object that you evidently think not good, which you will not tell me?"

"But it is a good object—in a way," said Frances. She looked doubtful and puzzled. "Is it not a good thing to help people—out of—difficulties?"

"Does Mr. Wedderburn want to help some one out of difficulties?" said Laurence in a slightly ironical tone. Then, as Frances did not answer, he pursued his point: "Or is it Mr. Wedderburn's own difficulties that you are concerned about?"

"You are unkind, Laurence, to ask me questions when I

have told you I could not answer them," said Frances, with downcast eyes.

"Then I will ask no more," said Mr. Corbet promptly. "But I must say, Frances, that I don't at all like your giving this sum to your father—"

"Oh, I knew you would despise me for asking you for it."

"Nonsense, my good child, you have not asked me for it, because it is your own money; and if you did ask me, I should feel honored, instead of despising you. No, the money I transferred to you some years ago is yours, and I, as your guardian and trustee, can advance a portion of it quite easily; but what I wish you to lay to heart is this, that if you begin by giving a hundred pounds to your father a week after you have made yourself known to him, how long is that six thousand going to last?"

"I cannot give him anything without your consent."

"Until you are twenty-one. When you are twenty-one you can, if you like, make ducks and drakes of it as much as you please. But I shall be sorry to see it."

Frances looked up at him, and he noted that her eyes were wet.

"Laurence," she said, with a sweet earnestness which he could not resist, "indeed I am not so foolish as you think. Of course, I cannot promise that I will never give anything to my father, but I will promise not to give away what you have given me unless there is real need. There is real need now, Laurence; believe me."

"I do believe you, with all my heart," he said. "So now let us consider the business settled. How will you take it? as they say at the bank. In notes?"

"I think it would be better."

"So, I daresay it would. Notes can't be traced so easily, eh? Will a hundred be enough, do you think?"

"Oh, I think so—I hope so."

"As we are about it, make it a hundred and fifty. Then he can't complain of not being well treated."

"He has not complained," said Frances in rather a hurt

voice. "And Laurence, I daresay I laid myself open to—to his telling me about his—his troubles, because I had said to him, that if ever I could help him, I would. He is my father," she added in a faltering voice.

"Yes dear; unfortunately. Now, you don't mean to be angry with me for that? you know we have always agreed that he did not treat you well on board the Attaman. Perhaps you would have preferred to be drowned or burnt?"

Frances could not help a smile. And Laurence was secretly triumphant, for her face had been so tragic when she entered the library, that he had prophesied disaster.

He unlocked a drawer, and produced a box, from which he took the required notes which he enclosed in a large envelope and handed to his ward. "There," he said gravely, "your fortune is diminished to the extent of one hundred and fifty pounds."

"You are very good to me," she said gratefully.

"Good—for letting you have your own property?"

"It was not my property until you give it me."

"That is so long ago that it does not count. And now tell me, Frank—I ask merely out of curiosity—what you would have done if I had refused to advance it, which I had a perfectly legal right to do?"

She sat silent, with her eyes upon the envelope in her hand.

"Tell me, Frank, anything desperate?"

"I don't know whether you would call it desperate," she said. "I think I should have gone away into the world and never seen you again."

"What! You would have been so angry with me?"

"Not angry, exactly; but I could never have looked you in the face again if—"

And there she stopped.

"I see," said Laurence to himself. "It's an uglier story than she would like me to hear. And it would all have come out but for this money which has to be paid to somebody, either as blackmail or restitution, or something. I

must say, Wedderburn is a man to be proud of. I hope he won't do anything very disgraceful before we've done with him."

"It is time for me to be going, Laurence. Will you order the fly for me?"

"Let the fly go back, and I'll drive you over."

"Thank you, no, Laurence. I am sure my father would not like it. And people might talk. I had better go quietly in a fly, and then return to King's Leigh."

"Well, perhaps it would be better. What does Mrs. Fleming say to your escapades?"

"She does not know of them altogether. But Laurence, I was obliged to take Dr. Fleming into my confidence this morning. He knows now—who I am."

"Fleming is safe enough. But don't confide in all the world just yet, Frances. Let us see how things go on."

He put her into the cab with all his accustomed kindness and gentleness, but she fancied that he looked rather sad and lonely as he stood on the steps to bid her good-bye.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

## A BOLD STROKE.

Frances's departure from Mr. Wedderburn's house was witnessed by Lavinia with much indignation. The girl's secret anguish had not made her blind to the figure awaiting her at the drawing-room door; she had passed it without recognition, and had greatly infuriated Miss Wedderburn by so doing. Curiously enough, Miss Wedderburn's wrath fell upon Silas rather than on his daughter. She had certain plans respecting Frances which she did not intend to alter; but she was resolved to make Silas suffer for the slight he had inflicted upon her in not taking her into his confidence. And when Mr. Wedderburn had watched his daughter out of the house and returned to the study, where he seated himself in a low chair and covered his face with his hands, Miss Wedderburn followed him in her most determined manner and shut the study door. Silas looked up; his face white and drawn from conflicting emotions, his eyes wet with tears.

"Lavinia," he said, "you will excuse me—but I wish to be alone."

"I dare say you do," said Lavinia calmly, "but as it happens, Silas, I have a good deal to say to you, and I wish to say it now."

"I cannot listen."

"Excuse me, but you must and will. There are one or two things which I want to point out to you, Silas. You think I am blind, but I assure you that I see as much as other people."

"You see too much—you hear too much," said Silas, almost passionately. And it seemed to Lavinia that he indicated with a wave of his hand the bookcase which covered



the window into the linen-cupboard. Miss Wedderburn blazed into sudden wrath.

"Pray what do you mean to insinuate by that?" she asked. "That I have pried into your secrets? That I have listened to your private conversations? I assure you I can form a true estimate of your character without doing that, Silas, and I believe I know you as well as anyone in the world."

"You know my worst points, I am well aware of it," said Silas bitterly. "You have taken a special pleasure in them, I believe."

"I have never taken a special pleasure in your weaknesses," said Lavinia pointedly. "I have often wished that I could have prevented you from giving way to them. This application of yours to Frances for help—what was it but a weakness?"

"How do you know that I applied to her for help?"

"I know simply because I have common-sense. She is not so fond of you as to come twice in one week without special reason. You must have written to her to come this second time. And what have you done that for, unless you wanted help?"

Silas was in a difficulty. He tried subterfuge, although he knew that it was not an easy matter to put his cousin off the scent of a discovery.

"I acknowledge," he said, in a conciliatory tone, "that I am in debt. I have told you so before. I am pressed by my creditors. Under these circumstances, and as Frances had offered me her kind assistance, I thought that I might as well ask her—for a loan."

"Then you are a fool," said Miss Wedderburn.

"Lavinia!"

"And worse!—a liar. What you have told me is not true."

"Not true! As heaven is above me, I swear that I am in debt," said Silas, tragically.

"Ah, yes! But it was not to pay an ordinary debt that

you applied to Frances. It was to settle that little matter about the subscriptions."

"Lavinia! Lavinia! For God's sake!—what do you know?"

"I have hit on the truth at last, have I?" she said, with a sour look of triumph which filled Silas Wedderburn with sick disgust. "Well, you have as good as confessed it, at any rate. I've suspected it for some time."

Her cousin hid his face. He could say nothing. Even Frances's contempt was not so painful to him as the vulgar scorn of his weakness which Lavinia exhibited. Frances was above him; he said that; but Lavinia—where was she?

"I suppose," said Miss Wedderburn, after a pause, in which she had decided that the less she seemed to know the better, "I suppose that Mr. Derrick came to ask you to pay over the money? Now for goodness' sake, speak the truth, Silas; I can't help you out of the mess unless you tell me all about it. Was that Matthew Derrick's errand, or was it not?"

"It was."

"And you've had the subscriptions? How much was paid in?"

"Close upon eighty pounds."

"And you've spent it all?"

"Lavinia, you torture me."

"Good gracious," said Lavinia, "isn't it better for you to answer me here than be cross-examined in the dock?"

She was mistaken in her assumptions, for witnesses not criminals are cross-examined. But Mr. Wedderburn was not sufficiently himself to set her right, and he only groaned aloud.

"Do answer me without making that noise," said Lavinia. "Did you spend the money?"

"There was a man at Yarborough who pressed me to pay him. It was an old wine-bill; and I thought it would tell against me in the eyes of the chapel-people if it became

known. I paid it, and some other accounts, out of the building-fund money."

"And how on earth did you expect to make it up?"

"I thought they would not want it till July. My salary was to be paid in June. It seemed to me feasible enough."

"Because you had no common-sense," said Lavinia, almost pityingly. "You ought to have known that with a shrewd business man like Mr. Derrick at the head of affairs, he would want to know exactly what was coming in and what was going out. Silas, I'm ashamed of you. If I wanted to commit a fraud, I'd do it more cleverly than that!"

"There was no fraud," Silas pleaded feebly, but Lavinia passed over the observation in contempt.

"And what did Derrick say? He suspected, naturally." She knew quite well what Derrick had said, but she wanted to hear Silas's version from Silas's own lips.

"I am afraid he did. I made a slip in speaking to him the other day. I implied that Dr. Fleming's subscription of twenty pounds had not been paid to me. He seems to have inquired, and finds—in short he has asked me to hand over the whole sum before Wednesday. Otherwise he says that he shall call a meeting, and there would be, I presume, some sort of scandal."

"You mean that you would be tried for embezzlement, and sentenced to a term of penal servitude, like that young man in the draper's shop," said Miss Wedderburn dryly. "It would be a convenience if you would call things by their right names."

"You are very hard on me, Lavinia. I never meant to defraud—"

"What does it matter what you intended, if you do the thing?" responded Lavinia, cruelly. "Mr. Derrick was perfectly right. If you wanted to keep your position and your character, you should not have appropriated other people's money."

"It would have been paid back in June."

"Yes, but it is wanted in May. You've been a great fool, Silas. And now, I ask you, have you told Frances that it is for a debt that you want money, or have you told her the truth?"

"I was obliged to tell her. She would not help me when it was only a question of an ordinary debt."

"You told her," said Miss Wedderburn, with emphasis.

"I did."

"Then you are a worse idiot than I took you for. That's all," said Lavinia. But she meant by her "all" that it was a great deal indeed.

Mr. Wedderburn tried to defend himself. "Nothing else made any impression upon her. She seemed to think that a debt could stand over. It was only when I pointed out to her that ruin stared me in the face that she consented to ask Mr. Corbet for the money."

"Did you make her promise not to tell Mr. Corbet why you wanted it?"

"No, I never thought of that."

It was with positive horror that Lavinia lifted up her eyes and hands. "She will tell him everything. And it will leak out to the Flemings. And from the Flemings to the Derricks. Then all the fat will be in the fire."

"No, Lavinia, no. Frances will be faithful—if I know anything of her nature—"

"Which you don't. Girls are all alike. She is quite sure to tell, sooner or later. Why did you not think, Silas, of consulting me?"

He had thought of it. He did not like, however, to acknowledge that he had rejected the idea, because he thought that to apply to her for help would give her a stronger hold upon him than ever. But in his misery, he wished that he had done it now.

"You might have known," said Miss Wedderburn, trying to make her voice softer, "that my purse—like my heart—would always be open to you, Silas. I could have procured the money for you without difficulty. I am not well off,

but I have saved a little—a small sum—which would have been at your disposal. But you have not trusted me; and it is too late now.” She took out her handkerchief and wiped her eyes delicately. “It is your want of confidence that I feel, Silas,” she said.

“I am very sorry, Lavinia. If it had not been that I valued your regard—”

“But should you not have valued your daughter’s regard more than mine, Silas?” said his cousin. “Certainly hers would be more valuable than mine in days to come. She will be a wealthy woman, as I know, in the future, and it would have been worth while to secure her countenance and her esteem in view of the days when she can give without consulting anyone.”

“What do you mean? You have said something of this sort before,” cried Mr. Wedderburn. “How is it that Frances is going to be rich? How do you know?”

“Ah, that is my secret. I am afraid that when Frances is rich, however, she is not likely to bestow much money upon you, my dear Silas, since you have laid yourself open to her contempt.”

“She has no regard,—no respect—for me at all,” said Mr. Wedderburn in a broken voice. “The revelation that I made her will produce no great change.”

“No? Well, perhaps you can hardly wonder at it,” said Miss Wedderburn. “You deserted her rather cruelly on board that burning ship, did you not? I don’t suppose she will ever get over that. You don’t suppose she will, do you?”

“I would rather not discuss the matter with you, Lavinia. You are very hard and cruel,” said Silas, with the air of a martyr. But he was distressed by the knowledge that what she said was true.

“I speak only for your good,” said Miss Wedderburn. “And now I’ll tell you what you had better do. If you take this money from Frances, you must make up your mind to leave Rushton.”

"I—I scarcely see the necessity."

"Perhaps not; but I see it, and that ought to be enough for you. You will easily get another pastorate. And if we start fresh, as man and wife, and you let me manage your money affairs for you, you will soon find yourself in smooth waters again."

"Lavinia," said the minister, in great confusion of spirit, "I cannot marry one who thinks so lightly of me."

"But you promised to do it some time ago, and I think, Silas, you will have to keep your word."

"No, no! I would sooner—sooner answer to the law for breaking my promise. My feelings are changed, Lavinia. It is impossible for me to marry you."

"Then," said Lavinia, a baleful light showing itself in her pale blue eyes, "then I will go to Mr. Derrick and expose you. I swear I will. I'll tell him all about your debts, and the taking of the money, and the way you have made it up; and that Frances is your daughter, and that you left her on board the burning ship, because you thought that your life was too valuable to be lost, and that hers was not valuable at all—"

"Lavinia, you will ruin me!"

"I mean to ruin you, Silas Wedderburn, if you do not keep your word to me." The short silence that followed seemed to make the sentence more impressive. "It's years since you asked me to marry you," she went on quietly after that momentary pause; "and there has been no obstacle to our union during the last few months. I have been waiting and waiting, and I mean to wait no longer."

"Do you call that—love?" fell from Mr. Wedderburn's white lips.

"The right kind of love, I call it. Not the love that kisses and coaxes, but the love that tries to save a man from ruin. That's what I mean to do. You're a poor creature, Silas, but if you will trust to me, I'll see you through. I have no particular desire that any one of my name should come to ruin and disgrace. Fix the wedding-day and I'll

be true to you. Break off the engagement, and I go to Matthew Derrick first thing on Monday morning. You can think it over. You'll let me know in good time; but of course I can have no doubt as to what your decision will be. You are in that position, Silas, that you really can't help yourself." And she rose up and went out of the room, leaving Silas in the clutch of a cold despair.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

## BOUND HAND AND FOOT.

Silas refused to come to dinner. Miss Wedderburn did not greatly care. She made a good meal, of Irish stew and suet dumpling, the usual Saturday dinner in that house; and then she settled herself to her needlework in the dining-room. She fully expected to see Silas entering to submit himself to her wishes, and to crave her pardon for the delay. But hour succeeded hour, and Silas did not come.

When tea was ready, she determined to take him a cup. But she found the door locked, and he would not answer her when she knocked and called. Miss Wedderburn's lips looked strained and thin, as she carried the cup of tea back to the dining-room. She would not leave it at the door on the chance of his coming out for it. If he wanted his tea, he must either admit her to the study or come into the dining-room. But he made no sign.

At last, about five o'clock, the quietness of the street was broken by the rumbling of wheels. Miss Wedderburn looked out of the window, and saw that a cab was drawing up at the door. And surely it was Frances herself who was getting out of it. "She has brought the money," said Lavinia, with a subdued and grim kind of amusement. "I think I'll open the door."

But she was passed in the hall by a swift and silent figure issuing from the study door. Silas had seen his daughter alighting from the cab, and he threw a fiery glance at Lavinia as he passed her. Evidently he was not yet in a repentant state of mind. But Miss Wedderburn had decided upon her course of action, and meant to carry it out. She stepped quietly into the study, so that when Silas and his daughter entered the room, she was there to greet them



both. She came forward to meet Frances with a smile, and held out her hand. Frances hesitated a little before she took it.

"What are you doing here?" Mr. Wedderburn said, in angry tones. "This is not your place."

"Surely my place is with my future husband and my step-daughter," said Lavinia, sweetly.

Frances started, and fell back a step or two. Then she looked at her father with amaze. "This cannot be true, surely?" she said.

The perplexity on Silas's brow was painful to see. "We have spoken of it," he said, "but nothing is yet decided."

"Excuse me," said Lavinia, "you have no choice."

Frances had grown rather pale. "This is a matter with which I have nothing to do," she said. "It is no concern of mine."

"No concern of yours whom your father marries?"

"So you know, too?" said Frances, turning to Lavinia in surprise.

"Of course I know. Do you think that your father has secrets from me?"

"I was not aware that he thought of making you his wife," said Frances simply. "I hope you will be happy. I will discharge my errand to my father, if you will kindly leave us together for a moment or so, and then I will go back to King's Leigh."

"Very fine, your dismissing me in that way," said Lavinia. "You think I am of no importance in this house, I suppose. You will soon see your mistake. I shall stay here as long as you stay, and you can do your errand in my presence. I know well enough what it is."

Frances cast a questioning glance at her father. She did not know whether to take Miss Wedderburn at her word or not. If her father would but have spoken—but he did not speak. He stood before her, ghastly pale, with livid marks about his eyes and mouth, but without a word of repudiation or of defense.

Frances held out an envelope to him, and he took it with a nerveless hand which did not seem able to grasp closely. In another moment Miss Wedderburn had sprung upon it and wrested it from her cousin. Frances uttered a little startled cry. But Mr. Wedderburn seemed incapable of protest or resistance of any kind. And in the meantime, Lavinia tore open the envelope, and ascertained the nature of its contents.

"I thought so," she said, with a disagreeable smile. "You should have consulted me before you applied to your daughter, Silas. The matter is in my hands now, as it ought to have been from the beginning."

"The matter is practically settled," said Frances with dignity. "If I choose to make my father a present, it does not concern you."

"Oh, everything that concerns Silas concerns me," replied Lavinia. "I know what this money is for. It is to prevent your father's ruin and disgrace. He has taken what did not belong to him and does not know how to pay it back; and you have got the money for him, by betraying his secret to Mr. Corbet—"

"I have not!" cried Frances. "I have not told Mr. Corbet a word about it—except that it was for my father."

"At any rate, it is in my hands now," said Miss Wedderburn, with a wicked light in her cold eyes. "So, Silas, you can make up your mind."

"What is my father to make up his mind about?" said Frances quickly. She was beginning to hate this woman, this Lavinia Wedderburn, who could make her father suffer as she saw that he suffered now.

"I will tell you," said Miss Wedderburn, "what he has to make up his mind about. It is the old story, whether he will behave honestly or not. Generally, it's not. Your father is not a very estimable character, Frances. He is mean and cowardly and deceitful—"

"You shall not call him so to me!" said Frances, in generous wrath.

"I shall call him what I like. He belongs to me a great deal more than he belongs to you. He promised to marry me years ago. At first I put him off, because I did not wish to leave Miss Kettlewell; lately it has been he that has put me off. And I do not mean to be put off any longer."

"Do you mean to marry him if he does not wish to marry you?" said Frances scornfully.

"Yes, my dear, I do. For his own good. I can honestly say that it won't be for mine. But he wants somebody to prevent him from sinking lower than he has sunk already, and I can do that if I can do nothing else."

Then Silas lifted up his gray face and spoke. "You will sink me to the nethermost hell," he said hoarsely. "If I marry you, I shall kill you—sooner or later; you may be sure of that."

"I'll take the risk," said Miss Wedderburn, coolly. "Look here: I hold in my hand the notes which you were going to put into the bank for Monday. Oh, you can put them in; I've no objection; but if you refuse to say you'll marry me, I should advise Frances to take them back again. For they will be of no good, as regards Silas's character."

"What do you mean?" said Frances.

"He knows what I mean," replied Miss Wedderburn, nodding towards her cousin's haggard face. "You can see that he knows, if you only look at him. He knows that if he refuses, I shall go to Mr. Derrick with the whole story, and whether he is sent to jail or not, he'll be disgraced in the eyes of the whole congregation and forced to leave Rushton quicker than he came."

"You would never be so wicked!" cried Frances, indignantly.

"I see no wickedness in it," Miss Wedderburn protested. "We must all fight for our own hand. I fight for mine."

"Do you mean to say that after living in his house and promising to marry him, you would expose him to ruin and disgrace?"

"If he does not keep his word to me, I will."

"Oh—it is cruel!—"

"It is for his good," said Lavinia. "He needs some one to take care of him. I will take care of him. But if he breaks his word now, I will see that everyone knows his true character and his history, from the day when he left you on the burning deck, as the poet says—"

"You know that, too!" said Frances, recoiling.

"—to the day when he asked you for money to pay back the sum that he had stolen," Miss Wedderburn concluded, with cold indifference.

"Father!" cried the girl, "Father, how can you let her talk in this way?"

Silas had crouched down in his big chair, and was hiding his face in his hands. At Frances's cry, he looked up with a dazed, bewildered air. Then he wrung his white hands helplessly.

"It's no use, Frances," he said. "She has me, body and soul. I can't help myself. I'll marry her—yes, and then I'll—I'll kill her or myself; it doesn't much matter which —" and he dropped his face upon his hands again.

All the old feeling of resentment and contempt faded out of Frances's mind as she stood and looked at him, realizing perhaps for the first time that he was not only a weak, but a most unhappy man. She flew to his side, and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Father, don't give way to her!" she said. "Never mind her threats. She will never dare to carry them out. Lavinia Wedderburn," she said, looking at her cousin with flashing eyes, "if you carry out what you have threatened, you will live in infamy for the rest of your days."

Lavinia shrugged her shoulders and looked at Silas Wedderburn. The words that Frances used were as words spoken in an unknown tongue. For what was "infamy." She did not care what people said of her, so long as her own purposes were carried out.

"Father," Frances said, bending over him, and finally kneeling beside him, "do not listen to her. If she speaks,

I can speak too. I and Mr. Corbet and the Flemings, we will all befriend you. No harm shall come to you from her. Say only that you will not marry her; be brave, dear father, and defy her, and her malice will be powerless."

"Did you ever know your father to be brave?" said Lavinia, scoffingly. But Frances turned a deaf ear to her now.

"Father," she went on eagerly. "I will give myself to you. I will come and live with you if you like. I will be the very best daughter in the world. Only tell this woman to go—tell her you will have nothing to do with her, and I will protect you. I am sure I can. There are other places beside Rushton in the world where we can be happy."

"But the story will follow you wherever you go," said Miss Wedderburn quietly, "you will never be able to escape from it. If once it is known, Silas Wedderburn will never be able to hold up his head again."

Then Silas roused himself a little, and looked with wild eyes into his daughter's face.

"It is true, what she says, Frances. I can't deny it. Even if I went away, there would be no peace for me. She has fixed my fate. I must marry her—and lose my soul with her. It is too late for you to save me now."

"It is not too late, father. I am quite sure that Mr. Corbet and I could make it all right with Mr. Derrick. He is a kind man at heart. Father, trust to me. Let me stay with you. Tell Cousin Lavinia to pack her boxes and go. We shall have no peace or happiness while she is here."

"You are a bold girl," said Miss Wedderburn, with something like complacency in her tone. "I bear you no malice for what you say against me, Frances. You fight well for your own side."

"Father—speak; fight for yourself," said Frances. But her father only dropped his head against her arm and sighed.

"He has no fight in him," said Lavinia, quietly. "He never had. He's a weak man who wants a support. I'll be

that support to him, and I'll never fail him—if he marries me.”

“You see, Frances,” said the man, hoarsely. “You see I cannot help myself.”

“You can! You can! Father, tell her to go away, and trust to me.”

“You are only a girl,” moaned Mr. Wedderburn. “What can you do? You cannot stay the processes of law, if once they are set in motion. You cannot give me back my good name, if I lose it. I am bound hand and foot.”

“That is the first sensible word you have said to-day,” remarked his cousin, with approval. “Bound hand and foot—so you are. I am glad you acknowledge it.”

“Bound hand and foot,” repeated Silas, pressing his hand to his forehead, and looking round him wildly. “Go, child, go! You mean kindly, but you have come too late. I must do what she tells me, or I am lost.”

“Exactly,” said Miss Wedderburn. “And now, Frances, if I were you, I would go. There is no use in your staying; and there is not room for both of us in the house, I think. I dare say I shall see more of you by and by.”

“I hope not. I have no desire to see anything of you at all. Father, must I go?”

“Yes, go, go; there is nothing to be done,” said Mr. Wedderburn. She rose to her feet and looked at him for a moment, with despair written on her face. He was not a man that could be helped. Yet in that hour of his weakness, her heart went out to him, and she would have helped him and saved him if he had let her have her way.

Finally, she kissed him on the forehead—she had never thought before that she could bring herself to this—and went slowly and lingeringly out of the house in which she had been forbidden to remain.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

## A SUNDAY GOSSIP.

Frances's absence had occasioned Mrs. Fleming no little anxiety, in spite of the fact that Dr. Fleming returned early in the afternoon to explain that she had gone to see her guardian.

"And why should she go to see her guardian?" said Mrs. Fleming, "What is going on? There seems to me to be something in the air which I cannot understand."

"There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in thy philosophy, my Margaret," said the doctor. "Leave Frances alone; she is in a very difficult position, as you will acknowledge when you know the truth."

"There is nothing wrong, is there, Tom?"

"Nothing in the sense of wrong-doing, that I am aware of, my dear; certainly nothing wrong on Frances's part. It is one of those complications of life which we cannot avoid or avert. The wisest thing Frances could do was to go and talk to Laurence about it all, I fancy."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Fleming, after a pause for reflection, "that it is something about Frances's parentage and family?"

"Possibly," said the doctor. Then, with a twinkle in his eye. "You don't get any secrets out of me, my dear. But I have no doubt that either Laurence or Frances will tell you in good time."

"You don't mean to say that Frances is going to marry him?"

"Marry him? marry whom?"

"Oh, perhaps I ought not to tell you," said Mrs. Fleming, with an increase of color in her gentle face. "Still, I think

Laurence generally expects me to tell you everything. He wanted to marry Frances, and she refused him."

"Sensible girl!" said the doctor. "He's too old for her."

"Do you think so? He is very young for his age, and he seems bent on it."

"Well, I daresay he seems old to Frances. A girl like her thinks every man over thirty an antediluvian. And by the way, how are those two young people in Mayfair getting on? Does Milly never intend to come back at all?"

"Not just yet, I think," said Mrs. Fleming a little ruefully. "She is enjoying herself very much, and Lady Hernesdale is very kind to her."

"I wonder if Lady Hernesdale would be as kind if Milly hadn't a penny-piece. Hardly!"

"Don't attribute bad motives, Tom. I really think that we misjudged Lady Hernesdale in the old days when I used to accuse her of snubbing us."

"I should not much like her to be tried," said the doctor cynically.

It was evening before Frances came back to King's Leigh in the White Hart fly, and Mrs. Fleming saw at once that she was excited and overwrought. Her face was pale and her eyes showed signs of tears. The day had evidently been a trying one to her, and Mrs. Fleming at once put away any feelings of anger or suspicion that had stolen, even for a moment, into her gentle heart, and lavished all her tenderness upon the girl. Frances was easy to manage. She accepted with gratitude Mrs. Fleming's proposal that she should not come down to dinner; and she allowed herself to be put to bed and dosed with the soup and portwine which the doctor immediately prescribed. She was either very unwell, or in great trouble; and nobody could exactly say what ailed her. She avowed herself very tired, yet when Mrs. Fleming stole in to see if she had fallen asleep, she found the girl wide awake, with eyes which seemed as if they could never close.



"Don't you think I had better ask my husband for something to make you sleep, dear?"

"No, thank you; I never take anything of that kind. I daresay I shall sleep presently."

"Shall I come in again later and see?"

"No, thank you, dear Mrs. Fleming; you are so very, very kind."

"I should like to help you, dear, if only I knew how."

"You are all so good to me," said Frances, turning away her face. Then, after a little pause, "I would tell you everything that troubles me if it were not that other people are concerned. One thing in particular I should like you to know. But Laurence asked me not to speak of it just yet. Perhaps by and by—"

"But it is not that which troubles you, is it?" said Mrs. Fleming believing her to allude to Laurence's proposal of marriage.

"No, not so much. But there are several things—and I must not speak of them. Dear Mrs. Fleming, only don't think me ungrateful and ill-behaved; I know I have not seemed like other girls—I have been willful and inclined to take my own way; but it was not always my fault. I have been obliged to do what I did not like to do,"—and then Frances's composure gave way, and her sentence ended in a burst of tears.

"Dear child, I am sure nobody wants to coerce you into doing what you do not wish. Laurence would be the last person to urge his claim, if he thought that it made you unhappy."

"His claim?" said Frances, drying her eyes. "Oh—you know about—that?"

"He told me. He is sincerely attached to you, Frances, and would make you very happy."

"It—it isn't that which troubles me," said Frances, rather enigmatically; and Mrs. Fleming found herself obliged to retire, without asking further questions.

She could not resist the temptation, however, of confid-

ing her doubts and anxieties to Chloe. She had always told everything to Chloe; the mother and daughter had been like sisters, ever since Chloe left school at seventeen. And it was to Chloe that she turned for comfort now.

"Can you understand Frances, Chloe?"

"Understand her, mother? Yes, I think so. Frances is very candid."

"I should have said just the contrary. She seems to me exceedingly reserved."

"That is just why she is so unhappy just now," said Chloe with a smile. "She has something on her mind that she can't tell us, and is naturally so candid that she cannot bear to keep a secret from us, and so she is miserable. I think nobody is so wretched as the frank and open person who is obliged to keep a secret for the sake of other people."

"You may be right," said Mrs. Fleming slowly. "Though how you are so wise, I do not know. But it is unnatural for a girl of that age to have secrets to keep; to tell the truth, Chloe, I do not like it, and if Milly were at home I should wish to see the last of Frances."

"Oh mother dear, isn't that rather hard of you?" said Chloe sweetly. "Poor Frances cannot help it, and it is just because she is so truthful that she worries herself. I can see that, from the little things she drops."

"You mean that she is really concealing something from us which perhaps we ought to know?"

"Mr. Corbet knows," said Chloe. "And I think father does; so we must wait our turn. It can't be anything very bad when Laurence Corbet wants to marry her, and she is such a favorite with father. Don't you see how fond father is growing of her?"

"Yes, I see," said Mrs. Fleming, "and I suppose I am uncharitable. But I never did like secrets."

"And yet we all have secrets to keep," said Chloe dreamily.

"Not you, Chloe!" said her mother, half reproachfully.

Chloe started, and looked at Mrs. Fleming for a moment before she replied. Then she colored and turned away.

"Well, perhaps I am the exception," she said as she went back into the house, leaving her mother on the terrace where an encampment had been made for the Sunday afternoon. Frances was lying down in her room, and Mrs. Fleming supposed that Chloe had gone to look after her, so that she comfortably resumed the reading of a magazine which had been laid face downwards on her lap, and waited patiently for the coming of afternoon tea. Presently a servant brought out a table and a white cloth, then came the silver tray with the silver kettle bubbling over the blue flame of the spirit lamp, then tea and cake and bread and butter. But as yet nobody except Mrs. Fleming seemed to desire any tea.

Presently her husband appeared, fresh from Rushton, where he had been to see some of his patients. He settled himself in a basket-chair, accepted a cup of tea from his wife's hand and then said, in a surprised tone—

"But where are the girls?"

"They are coming. Frances has been to sleep, and Chloe has gone to fetch her. In the meantime, I see another visitor coming down the avenue. It is Laurence; I am so glad!"

"Yes, that's right," said the doctor, putting down his cup and rising from his chair. He went down the terrace steps between the great stone vases, already filled with flowering plants, and met the visitor with whom he shook hands cordially.

"Glad to see you, Laurence. I was thinking you might be coming over."

"Oh, did you?" said Laurence, who knew what this remark signified. "Margaret, how are you? You look very cosy out here. Warm weather for May, is it not? And how are you all?"

His eye rapidly explored the terrace; he was evidently

looking for Frances, and Mrs. Fleming answered the unspoken question.

"Frances had a headache to-day; she has been lying down. I think she overtired herself yesterday."

"Ah, yes, she came over to see me," said Laurence incidentally, "it was a long drive."

He avoided looking at Dr. Fleming. But the doctor was looking at him rather intently.

"I've just been into town," the doctor remarked, "and seen Matthew Derrick; he seems very much worried."

"What about?"

"His minister," said Dr. Fleming dryly. Then Laurence looked at him, and a curiously confidential relation was immediately established between the two men.

"The minister? Is not that Mr. Wedderburn?" said Margaret innocently.

"Yes, Mr. Wedderburn. It seems he is ill. Could not preach this morning, and they had a great difficulty in getting anyone to take his place."

"Till?" repeated Laurence thoughtfully. "What's the matter with him?"

Mrs. Fleming had turned her back to speak to a servant. The doctor made a hasty reply in an undertone, which he did not mean his wife to hear.

"Conscience, I think," he said. Then, in a louder tone, "Derrick wanted me to go and see him, but I said I couldn't very well go without being sent for, you know. Mental work and worry, I expect."

"Here come the girls at last," said Mrs. Fleming, who had not been attending much to the colloquy between the men; and she rose to meet them, while Laurence said hurriedly to the doctor—

"Don't say more about Wedderburn than you can help when Frances is here. Tell me afterwards what you mean."

"All right. Poor girl, I'm sorry for her."

Laurence turned from him impatiently. It was to him

one of the trials of the position that people would always be "sorry" for Frances when the truth was known.

He was shocked at his ward's appearance. She had been pale and agitated when he had seen her on the previous day, but now she looked positively ill. She was perfectly white, with great shadows round her eyes. But when he held her hand and questioned her with anxiety as to her health, she declared herself better—thanks to Dr. Fleming's medicine and Mrs. Fleming's care. "I shall soon be quite well, it was only a nervous headache," she said, seating herself in the chair that the doctor indicated and accepting a cup of tea.

"And when are you coming home," said Laurence. "When can you spare her, Mrs. Fleming? I think she had better come back to Denstone."

Frances's face flushed visibly. "We have made no plans, I think," she said, glancing at Mrs. Fleming.

"She had better go to the seaside for a few weeks," said Dr. Fleming with decision. "She wants bracing up."

"Oh, no," said Frances hastily. "Indeed, I don't need to go to the seaside. I would a great deal rather stay near Rushton."

When she had said the words, a flood of hot color invaded her face. She was in so sensitive a state, that the slightest emotion made itself visible by her blood. Everyone remarked the sudden blush and inwardly commented on it. Mrs. Fleming felt distressfully certain that there was something wrong; Chloe said to herself that she often blushed at nothing, especially when she was not well, and that Frances probably had blushed at nothing too. Laurence and the doctor, who knew only too well the origin of that sudden scarlet flood, looked down and said nothing. The subject of the seaside was dropped by common consent and the party proceeded to talk of the most recent novel.

When tea was over, Laurence managed to get his host away into the garden, out of Frances's hearing. "Well," he said, "Tom, what do you mean?"

"I mean—you've been a confounded ass, Laurence."

"I daresay. In what particular manner?"

"Why about that poor girl. You have shilly-shallied over her until she is let in for half a dozen complications. If she was not to be called Wedderburn you should have called her Smith, Brown, Jones, anything but Corbet. To associate her with your own family will make it all the worse when the truth comes out. It's such a come-down for her, don't you see?"

"She has always known the truth," said Laurence dryly.

"As if that makes it any better for her! And then to bring her to Rushton, where her father himself was living!"

"I did not know that till after our arrival."

"Oh, you didn't? I thought that might be part of your scheme, perhaps. You ought to have moved heaven and earth to get him away. It's upset her nerves—perhaps for life."

"No, no; Frances is too sensible for that."

"It's not a matter of sense; it's nervous organization. Do you suppose you can treat a young girl like a man? It is nothing for you to despise Wedderburn—I conclude he is to be despised from the way you have treated him—but to bring up his daughter to despise him also, and then to let her see him, hear him preach, visit him—you must know very little of a sensitive girl to think that all that would not break her down."

"I would give her all I have—name and all—if she would have me, to make amends. But—one moment—what did you say about Derrick and Wedderburn? Nothing wrong in that quarter?"

"Well, I can hardly say," returned the doctor dubiously. "Derrick told me nothing—thought he told me nothing, at any rate. But he dropped one or two words—Do you know at all through Frances or any other source, whether Wedderburn is troubled about money matters?"

"Hum. Is that a fair question?"

"Perhaps not. Let it pass. Derrick is troubled about him—seems to suspect something, that is all. He let something fall about the chapel funds—"

"Oh, confound him!" said Laurence. "Tell him he'll be sued for libel if he does not shut up."

But he felt certain that he knew now why Frances had given her father that hundred pounds.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### A BROKEN MAN.

In three or four days Frances was fairly well again, although still a little pale and anxious-looking; and Dr. Fleming, meeting Laurence in the street, was able to reassure him on the score of her health. "If she has no more worry or bother," he said, "she will be all right."

"Have you heard anything fresh about Wedderburn?"

"No. Have you?"

"Not much. But Derrick's all right again. Looks as though ten years had been taken off his age. Whatever it may have been, I think it's put straight now."

"Yes, with Frances's money," said Laurence to himself, rather bitterly. Then aloud: "I think I shall go and see Wedderburn myself."

"If you've anything to propose, go by all means. I suppose you don't mean simply a little friendly call?"

"I would give him an income for life, if he'd clear out of Rushton."

"You are playing Derrick's game. Derrick wants him to go."

"Eh? You said it was all right with him."

"Yes? the burden's removed. There'll be no scandal, if you mean that sort of thing. But Derrick is an earnest man, somewhat devout in his rough way, and he has lost faith in Wedderburn."

"I hardly wonder at that."

"And then there's another thing," said the doctor, rather hesitatingly. "You ought to know it before you go to the house. Mr. Wedderburn is going to marry his cousin. You know, the estimable lady who was found ransacking Miss Kettlewell's drawers on the night she died."



Laurence shrugged his shoulders. "I think they will be well matched," he said carelessly. "Probably it was this that tended to upset Frances. Well I am glad I know it before I go."

"You mean to go now?"

"I had that idea in my mind."

"Talk quietly to him. Don't bully the man."

"Do I ever bully any one?"

"You know what I mean. Don't abuse him and bully-rag him to his face. Yes, I've known you to do that when your blood was up and you were a few years younger. But Wedderburn has a weak heart. So spare him if you can."

Laurence was rather inclined to scorn the warning, but he remembered it when he found himself in Silas Wedderburn's study a few minutes later. The minister was doing nothing. He sat in a chair drawn up to the table, with an open manuscript book before him, but the page was blank. His face was pale; his eyes had a sunken look. He seemed to have lost flesh, and his black clothes had wrinkles which used not to show in his more self-satisfied days. But the change in his appearance did not prepossess Laurence in his favor. He only thought that the man looked sallow, and wondered whether he ever took opium. He had seen that glassy look in the eyes of an opium-eater many a time.

As it happened, he was wrong. Silas Wedderburn had never touched opium in his life.

When Mr. Corbet was announced, the minister rose awkwardly to his feet, and gasped out something which might be meant for a welcome, though it did not sound much like one. Then he made a motion, quavering and uncertain, with his hand. But as Mr. Corbet did not notice it, he let it fall to his side again, and stood, spiritless and crushed, as Laurence thought, with his left hand on the back of his chair.

"It is a long time since we met, Mr. Wedderburn," said the visitor, seating himself coolly, with his hat and stick on his knee.

"Very long," said Silas, looking round him covertly, as if for some means of escape. As there seemed to be none, he collapsed into his chair again and sighed.

"I need make no special reference to the time when we parted," said Laurence, with a slight, ironical smile; "the circumstances were peculiar and have always—to me—seemed painful. Possibly the saving of your 'valuable life,' as I remember you then termed it, may afford you a pleasanter recollection of the scene."

Silas stirred in his chair. His face grew a shade yellower, but he seemed resolved not to speak. His silence embittered Laurence against him; he would not have continued to speak so mockingly if the man had but tried to say a word in his own defense.

"The child whose life you were prepared to sacrifice for your own," he said, "fell to my great satisfaction into my hands. I saved her—not having perhaps so great a regard for my own skin as her father had for his, and did not attempt to give her back to him. I argued—rightly, I think—that her portion would probably be that of poverty and neglect. So I took her away with me, educated her, made her life as happy as I knew how, and then brought her to my home at Denstone. I do not think that in the meantime you made any effort to find your daughter, Mr. Wedderburn."

"On my soul, sir, I thought she was dead," said Silas, with sudden passion.

"And that, in that case, you were her murderer?" Laurence asked.

He had not meant to put that question, although he had often in his heart accused Wedderburn of potential murder. The minister looked at him with a livid face.

"What else was it," Laurence asked hotly, "when you left her to perish by fire or tempest, robbing her of her place in the boat that came to save her, crying out that your contemptible life was more valuable than hers? Have you repented of that sin, I wonder, when you preach to sinners

from your pulpit?" Then he pulled himself up suddenly. "That was not what I came to say, however. I apologize for my incivility. It is not my part, of course, to point out to you how honest men regard these things."

A dull red flush crept into Silas Wedderburn's face; it spread until it reached the very roots of his thick black hair, and when it faded, it left blotches on the sickly white of his complexion. For a moment, Laurence felt a keen pleasure in the thought that he had penetrated the thick skin of the man's complacent vanity, that he had punished him, if ever so little, for his cowardice and selfishness; then, with a sudden revulsion of feeling, he felt ashamed of himself. The man was Frances's father after all. And he had not meant to reproach him for following out a course which had been, in the long run, of so much importance to Frances and himself.

"I came to speak of other matters," he said, resuming the coldness of his first manner. "I do not suppose that Frances has mentioned to you the fact that I have asked her to become my wife."

Silas started a little, and answered, in a hoarse, rough voice.

"She said nothing to me about it."

"She has not accepted me," Laurence said, "and perhaps she never will. But it has occurred to me that as you happen to be her father, and as she is under age, it might be advisable to secure your—consent. I presume you have no objections?"

"None. Of course—none."

"When she is twenty-one she will be her own mistress. I have settled enough upon her to afford her a small independence, and she can marry whom she will. But before the age of twenty-one, she will be still under my guardianship; and I suppose I may assume that there will be no necessity to consult you further respecting her marriage or establishment in life? She has been in my hands ever since

she was nine years old; it is only a form to ask you whether you have any wish to resume your parental rights?"

Mr. Wedderburn turned away his head, and allowed a sort of groan to escape his white lips. "You might spare me these questions, sir, I think," he said. "You must know that I have no desire to interfere."

"Very well," said Laurence promptly. "Then in my turn I have something to demand. As her guardian, I request, Mr. Wedderburn, that you will not henceforward molest my ward by applications to her for money."

Silas made a bound to his feet. His eyes glared angrily for a moment. Then he sank down again, breathing hard, and pressing his hand to his heart. Mr. Corbet, if he noticed these movements at all, put them down to affectation, and proceeded in the sternest and coldest tones.

"At my ward's request, I advanced her the sum for which she asked; but, note my words, Mr. Wedderburn, I shall not do it again. When her money is under her own control, she can do as she pleases; but upon my soul, I'd rather tie it up till she is twenty-five than give her the chance of throwing it away upon you. Did it never occur to you, sir, what a dastardly part you play when you try to prey upon the future of that daughter whom you basely abandoned in the hour of peril?"

"For God's sake, stop, sir," cried Silas Wedderburn, evidently almost beside himself. "I have no intention of asking her for money again; it was only that I was at the very point of ruin—and not only of ruin, but disgrace—when I begged her to hold out a helping hand. You yourself would not have cared to see me undergoing—undergoing—"

"The punishment you deserved," said Laurence with a cold smile. "I am not sure that I should have particularly regretted it. You are not known to be Frances's father, you see. In view of further temptation, I have a proposition to make to you. I don't know whether it has occurred to you that you are not especially well fitted to be the pastor of souls and preacher of the Gospel in this chapel

here at Rushton—or, indeed, of any other place of worship?”

Silas looked at him, with despair in his eyes. “I have been writing my resignation to Mr. Derrick,” he said.

“You have! I am glad to hear it—the first sign of sincerity I have seen in the man,” said Laurence to himself. “I propose then, Mr. Wedderburn, that you should accept from me a sum sufficient for your needs and those of your wife, as I hear you are about to be married, and go to some place—some distant place—where we shall never hear of you again. Go to America! go to Italy!—no, we might run against you there—go to the South Sea Islands! I will give you, to the half of my kingdom, anything you ask, so that we do not see you or hear of you again.”

“Is this my daughter’s wish as well as yours?” asked Wedderburn.

“I have not consulted her. I do not mean to consult her. She has distressed herself sufficiently; and I tell you, sir, I will not have her distressed. Take what you please, and go.”

“No,” said Silas, a strange agitation making itself visible in his face and manner, “no, no—I can take nothing from you.”

“Better to take from me than from Frances, or—from your chapel funds,” said Laurence. The last clause was a shot at a venture; but he dared it, for Frances’s sake.

Mr. Wedderburn threw up his hands. “She has betrayed me! She has told you everything!” he cried, clutching at his throat. “Oh, God in heaven, this is more than I can bear!”

He rose to his feet, staggering, stumbling, with one fist clenched as if he would have shaken it in Laurence’s face; and Laurence rose too and caught at him to support him, fully conscious now of the mischief that he had done. Dr. Fleming’s words returned to him with full force, when he looked at the terribly livid hue of the man’s face, at the

clutching fighting hands, the half-closed eye. Was Mr. Wedderburn going to die at his feet, in his presence, as a consequence of Laurence's own cruel and bitter words? It would be too awful an end, surely; it was only a passing attack of illness; he would be better soon.

Mr. Corbet managed to get one hand free, and rang the bell furiously. It was answered at once; almost it seemed as if Lavinia Wedderburn had been waiting to come in. She cast one furious glance at the visitor, then rushed to the assistance of her cousin. It was plain that she knew what to do. She extracted from his breast-pocket a small bottle from which she poured a few drops for him to inhale; then, when the gasps died down, and the clayey hue of his complexion became less death-like, she told the guest where to find brandy and other remedies, which were kept in a little cupboard beside the fire. In a little while, consciousness returned, and when Laurence had assisted Miss Wedderburn in placing the patient in an easy position on the sofa, he took his hat and prepared to leave the house.

"Can I send to Dr. Fleming? I shall be glad to do anything I can for Mr. Wedderburn," he said to Lavinia, with remorseful sincerity. But Lavinia shook her head.

"I don't think we want you to do any more for us, Mr. Corbet. You've done enough for the present. You've been pretty near the death of him, that's what it is," said Miss Wedderburn, losing her command of elegant English at this anxious moment of her life.

"I hope not," said Laurence politely; and he then marched away, evidently to Miss Wedderburn's great relief.

"A terrible pair," he said to himself as he went down the street. "But I did not want to kill the man. I ought to have remembered Fleming's warning. I'll confess to him when I see him again. After all, much as I detest this fellow Wedderburn, it came to me once or twice when I was talking to him that I was rather a brute. I hope he'll take the money and go, without any pretense of fine feel-

ings or gratitude. My poor Frances she would not like it if she had heard me to-day. But I could not help it; and as a matter of fact, if the interview had to be repeated, I am not sure whether I might not do it again. And yet, I don't know. If I am not mistaken, Silas Wedderburn is a broken man."

## CHAPTER XXXV.

## THE THROWING OF A BOMB.

"What is it?" said Mrs. Fleming, to a maid who had approached her with a very flurried appearance. "What is the matter, Mary?"

"If you please, ma'am, a lady wants to see you," was the utterly inadequate reply.

"Well?" said her mistress. But Mary looked away, and tried to seem unconscious. "Who is it, Mary?"

"If you please ma'am, she said I wasn't to give her name."

Chloe and Frances both looked up. There was a suggestion of something mysterious in the girl's tone.

"And she said, ma'am, would Miss Corbet and Miss Fleming please come too; as she had something very particular to say."

"Who can it be?" said Chloe.

"Some one wanting subscriptions, I should think. Come or not, as you like; I will go and interview this nameless personage," said Mrs. Fleming with a smile.

"Shall we go Frances? It may be interesting—or amusing. At any rate, it is something to do."

Frances had been listlessly dreaming over a book. She rose now, and smiled back an assent which had little alertness in it. In fact, a great deal of her old vivacity and alertness had disappeared; and Chloe was constantly on the outlook to invent occupations and interests for her. She drew her hand within her arm, and led her to the morning room, whither the mysterious lady had been bestowed.

But there was no mystery about the matter when the girls reached the room. Mrs. Fleming, with indignation aflame upon her cheek, was standing opposite a figure



which had once been well known in the house of King's Leigh—that of Lavinia Wedderburn. Even Frances started when she saw it, and would have gone back, had not Chloe gently drawn her forward into the room.

Miss Wedderburn presented all her old neatness and gentility of appearance. She wore a plain black dress, a beaded mantle, a bonnet of black and red, beneath which her black hair waved on either side of her high forehead. Her gloves were black, and in her hand she carried a reticule. She looked solemnly respectable and even distinguished. But there was a little smile, in which lurked malice, on her thin-lipped mouth.

She bowed to Chloe and Frances without rising; for although Mrs. Fleming stood, she continued to occupy her chair with undisturbed tranquillity. She looked as if no earthly power would suffice to move her from that chair, if she did not mean to leave it. And Mrs. Fleming resented the attitude which her guest had taken up.

"I asked for Mrs. Fleming by mistake," said Miss Wedderburn quite calmly. "Of course it was Miss Fleming that I desired to see. Miss Fleming and Miss Millicent Fleming are the present owners of this house, I believe. I have lived in it under very different auspices," and Miss Wedderburn looked round her pensively, and heaved a very artificial sigh.

"I do not know what you have to say to me, Miss Wedderburn," said Chloe gravely. She touched her mother gently on the arm. "Go away, dear mother, if you like, and leave Miss Wedderburn to me. You do not know her so well as I do."

"I should prefer that Mrs. Fleming remained, although I address myself to Miss Fleming," said Lavinia, woodenly. "I have a communication to make which will interest both of you extremely."

"I had better go," said Frances, in a low tone to Chloe. "It can have nothing to do with me." It was extremely painful to her to be present at a conversation, which

seemed likely to assume the character of a wordy duel, between her cousin and her friend. But again Miss Wedderburn intervened.

"It is of especial interest to you," she said, "and therefore I beg that you will remain. It would have given me pleasure if Dr. Fleming had been at home, and Miss Millicent also. I am going to tell you something that will interest you very much."

Her commanding manner took them all by surprise. Naturally they resented it, and yet they did not like to walk out of the room and refuse to listen to the "interesting" communication that she wished to make.

Frances turned very pale. She believed that she was going to listen to something about her father and herself.

"I am in a very awkward position," said Miss Wedderburn; but she did not look as though she thought so; "and I desire to extricate myself from it as soon as possible. When poor dear Miss Kettlewell died, her mind was prejudiced, and she believed the accusations which were leveled against myself. But in happier days, she was in the habit of making me small presents. You may remember, Miss Fleming, various occasions on which I received small and unimportant gifts from Miss Kettlewell. You were at any rate present on the occasion to which I wish to refer, when she presented me with this—this old-fashioned work-bag or reticule."

She lifted up the silk-embroidered bag which she carried in her hands, and displayed it to Chloe's astonished eyes.

"Yes," said the girl. "I remember it. I remember her giving it to you."

Miss Wedderburn bowed her head. "I am glad of an independent witness," she said. "Particularly glad. She remarked at the time, as you may remember, that the bag was quite worn out, that it was no use to her, that the lining was torn, and that therefore I might have it, as I was fond of odds and ends; you may recollect the speeches that your

esteemed relation was in the habit of making on similar occasions?"

"I remember," said Chloe with dignity, "that my cousin was often very kind to you, Miss Wedderburn."

Miss Wedderburn sniffed contemptuously. "Some people's kindness cost them very little," she said. "Odds and ends. She gave me the bag three weeks only before she died, and I put it away and never looked at it again. You can examine it for yourself, if you like. The lining is torn you will observe, all down one side."

"I see that it is."

"I put it away because I wished to efface all memory of Miss Kettlewell from my heart. I was disgusted with her behavior to me. You need not try to interrupt me, Mrs. Fleming; I know what I am saying, and I shall go on to the end. Only the other day did I come across this bag again; and it was then that I examined it for the first time since it was first put into my hands. I found between the silk and the lining, a certain piece of paper."

Chloe's eyes lightened; a sudden gleam of intelligence had come into her face. She almost smiled. "Go on, Miss Wedderburn," she said.

"That paper," said Miss Wedderburn impressively, "was the last will and testament of Keturah Kettlewell."

"Oh, this is abominable! this is bare-faced lying," said Mrs. Fleming, with quick, sudden wrath. "Really it is too much—"

"Wait, mother," said Chloe. "Let us hear Miss Wedderburn's statement to the end."

"I could not believe my eyes," said Lavinia, with a malicious smile. "I read and re-read, before I could understand. I took it at last to a lawyer, Mr. Cockburn in the High street and he made the matter clear to me. It was what is called a tolograph will, that is, written in the testator's own handwriting, duly signed and witnessed by two of her servants; dated only four weeks before her death.

Later, therefore, than the will by which the two Miss Flemings inherited the property."

"You will say next that it is left to yourself," said Mrs. Fleming, with a trembling laugh. She could not help seeing that Chloe believed the story.

"Oh, no, it is not left to myself," said Miss Wedderburn graciously, "although it is left to someone in whom I take a very particular interest. It is left to a young lady then staying at Denstone, a lady who passes under the name of Frances Corbet, but is well known to be not Mr. Corbet's relation at all."

"What? It is not true! It cannot be true!" exclaimed Mrs. Fleming. Frances looked as if she were about to faint. Chloe, with a sudden, brilliant smile, as if she had heard good news, put her arm round her friend's waist, and seated her in the nearest chair. "Left to Frances?" she inquired.

"Everything," said Miss Wedderburn, triumphantly. "House, estate, fortune, everything left absolutely to Frances. Mr. Cockburn says there is no reason at all to doubt the genuineness of the will."

"But of course we shall contest it," said Mrs. Fleming. Then, moved by a sudden impulse, she went up to Frances and took her hand. "You must not be vexed by my saying so, my dear. Of course I know that this is in no way your fault. But you have no claim to Miss Kettlewell's fortune, for you were in no way connected with her, and I am sure you are the very last person to uphold such an alteration of her will—"

"I never thought of it. I never guessed," said Frances, shivering as if with sudden cold. "And I should never have imagined—" turning to Miss Wedderburn with sudden passion—"that anybody could be so wicked as to bring up this paper—now—"

"Where does the wickedness come in?" asked Miss Wedderburn imperturbably. "You must remember that I am much more interested in you than in the Flemings, Frances. You may be surprised," she went on, addressing her—

self to Mrs. Fleming, "by the familiarity of my speech. I must explain what ought to have been explained before, that this young lady is Frances Wedderburn, not Frances Corbet, and that she is the daughter of the Reverend Silas Wedderburn of Zion Lane. Therefore, my cousin, and very shortly, I trust, to be my step-daughter."

"Oh, Frances, is this true?" said Chloe, in dismay.

"It is a plot," said Mrs. Fleming, with whitening lips. "Oh, I should never have thought it of you, Frances. That you could conspire with this woman to deceive us!" And she turned away, with her handkerchief to her eyes.

"But I have not—I have not," cried Frances, rising to her feet. "Indeed, I did not know of this will until this very moment. And as to my name—Mr. Corbet has known it all along, and I told Dr. Fleming myself only a few days ago. Oh, don't accuse me of deceiving you, or I think it will break my heart."

"Darling, we do not accuse you," said Chloe, taking the sobbing excited girl into her arms. "We know that you are loving and true, and will have nothing to do with this woman." She drew herself up, and over Frances's shoulder, she darted a look of keen contempt at Miss Wedderburn. "So that was the paper you stole from Miss Kettlewell's box?" she said.

"I stole no paper," said Miss Wedderburn monotonously. "I tell you I found it in the lining of this bag, which Miss Kettlewell herself gave to me."

"I should like to see the paper. I think I should recognize it," said Chloe quietly.

"I have a copy with me," answered Miss Wedderburn. "The original can be seen at Mr. Cockburn's office. I scarcely thought it safe to bring it out of the lawyer's hands."

"Did you think that we should destroy it?" said Chloe, with the faintest possible smile.

"I think I should if I had it here!" cried Frances.

"Hush, dear, hush! it will be all for the best. Show us your copy of the will, if you please, Miss Wedderburn."

Lavinia took from her pocket an envelope, which she laid on the table in front of Chloe. Inside it was the copy of the will.

"Thank you," Chloe said, with a dignity which repressed even Miss Wedderburn's insolent familiarity. "We will read it and consider it—when we are alone."

"You will observe," said Miss Wedderburn, "that I cannot be accused of any desire to keep the will back, seeing that by it, I lose my own small annuity. But as I am about to marry my cousin, this is a thing that I do not regret. And it would be pure hypocrisy if I pretended that I was sorry to think of my future step-daughter as the mistress of King's Leigh."

She rose in a leisurely manner and began to arrange her bag and her dress for walking.

"I will say good morning now," she remarked, "and I daresay I shall not see much more of you, Mrs. Fleming and Miss Fleming. But I shall hear of you. And I shall always be pleased to see or hear from Frances."

Frances shrank back, looking as if she did not reciprocate the sentiment; but nothing more was said until Miss Wedderburn had relieved them of her presence. Then Chloe said, with sudden pathos,

"Oh, my poor Frances! Are you really related to her? But never mind; you belong to us; we will never give you up."

"You will hate me," said Frances.

"No, darling, no. As if it were your fault! Let us look at this paper and see what it is. Come, mother, look!"

It was exactly as Miss Wedderburn had described it; a short business-like document; simply bequeathing all the writer possessed to Frances Corbet, in memory of her remarkable likeness to the writer's friend, Lady Emmeline Hernesdale. The names of the witnesses were well known to Chloe and Mrs. Fleming; they were old servants who

lived in Rushton and could easily be questioned on the subject.

"I am sure you won't mind my saying, Frances," said Mrs. Fleming, with her hand on the girl's arm, "that I don't believe for a moment that this will can possibly stand."

"It certainly will not stand if I have anything to do with it," said Frances hotly.

"But we shall not contest it, mother," said Chloe, with a smiling face. She looked as if the change of fortune pleased her; they had not seen her so radiant for months. It was a curious way in which to receive the news of a great reverse.

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

## THE TEST OF LOVE.

"We must have Millicent home," Dr. Fleming had said, when told of the disaster.

"Poor Milly! I am afraid it will go hard with her," his wife replied.

The doctor reflected. "I am not so sure. I doubt, you know, whether Frances will accept anything. I am sure Laurence won't take the change. Far be it from me to begrudge Frances the money if old Keturah in her right mind willed it to her. But she was decidedly off the balance during those last few months. Think of the scene at the ball."

"Chloe declares that Frances must accept it. She seems almost glad to be relieved of the responsibility of Miss Kettlewell's money."

"It may suit Chloe's book very well to get rid of it," said the doctor, bursting into a laugh, "but it won't suit Milly's. Lady Hernesdale will soon knock that engagement on the head, if Milly is no heiress."

It may be seen that the Flemings did not take their misfortunes so seriously as some families would have done. They had not launched out into extravagance; in fact, many persons said that they had not known how to live up to their present means and position; and they were healthy minded people, who did not consider money the chief item of their life. Dr. Fleming openly said that King's Leigh was all very well in the summer, but that he was sighing for his old home in town; and Chloe looked so happy that one could scarcely believe the bad news true! Mrs. Fleming was more concerned than the others; but even she was more anxious about Milly than anything or anybody else.



Frances had gone back to Denstone. It was an intolerable position for her, and she did not feel that she could possibly stay any longer at King's Leigh. Not that the Flemings blamed her or were unkind to her. Indeed, as Chloe said, the best thing was for Frances to be seen in their company as much as possible, so that everyone might know that they were all on friendly terms. And Frances agreed that this would be best, and they must be seen together very often; nevertheless she felt that she must get away, either to Denstone or some other quiet place, and rest for a little while. Laurence was absent in London and elsewhere; he divined that she would rather be at Denstone without him, so she was left to her own devices and to Mrs. Lester, and after a time found it a little dull.

Mrs. Fleming wrote to Millicent, and she also wrote to Lady Hernesdale, informing her of the new will that had been found. The mother felt as if she were plunging a knife into her own child as she did so; for she was certain that Charlie Heron's mother would not allow her son to marry a penniless girl; but she did not think that it would be right to keep back the information. And it had all the effect that she anticipated upon Lady Hernesdale's mind.

But upon the young people themselves, the effect was entirely different.

Lord Heron and Milly were in some respects very modern young people; they prided themselves on being free from sentimentality of any kind and their discourse was of dogs and horses, bicycles and motor-cars, than of love and poetry. But they were rather unworldly young people too, without much appreciation of the advantages of great wealth, so that Milly's first exclamation was—

"How pleased Andrew will be!"

"What, that Chloe's fortune is gone?"

"As pleased as Punch. He'll propose now; you see."

"But suppose Miss Corbet—Wedderburn, whatever her name is—won't accept the money?"

"Oh, but she's sure to accept it," said Milly hopefully; "people don't like to refuse fortunes, as a rule, do they?"

"Well, no. But if she is related to that woman who used to be Miss Kettlewell's companion—"

"She isn't like her; not the least bit in the world," Milly declared indignantly, "and I don't believe she'll take a penny of it away from us. I am sure I wouldn't mind sharing with her. Why shouldn't we be three co-heiresses, instead of two? There's quite enough for three people?"

"Quite," said Heron, with a laugh.

"But, Charlie, I've been thinking—"

"Yes, dear?"

"Couldn't we bring about Chloe's happiness through this complication?"

"I don't see."

"Well—you know Andrew quite well, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, we were pals at Oxford. Only he's an awful swell, and I'm not. I like Derrick awfully much."

"Then you had better write to him," said Milly, with uplifted finger, "and tell him of this sad misfortune that has befallen us."—and her eyes sparkled and her cheeks dimpled until Heron wanted to kiss her, but was a little afraid that she would call him "silly,"—"and say to him how poor we shall be; and see whether that does not bring him home to Chloe like a shot."

"But would your father and mother like that?" said Lord Heron, whose own father and mother would not have liked it at all.

"They would love it. They always really wanted Chloe to marry Andrew Derrick."

"And suppose it comes right after all, and Andrew has been lured home on false pretenses?"

"All the better. He can't wriggle out of it when once he has proposed and Chloe has accepted him."

Heron laughed, but was a little doubtful. As, however, Milly insisted upon his doing what she suggested, he wrote a short letter to Andrew, stating, without comment, what

had happened; and then posted it under cover to Mr. Derrick, who probably knew his son's address.

Certainly the matter did not present itself in the same light to the Hernesdales as it did to the Flemings. Lady Hernesdale thought it quite right that Milly should go back at once, as Mrs. Fleming had "so sensibly" suggested; but her son did not see the matter in the same light, at all. He pleaded that the season was scarcely at its height, that there were several engagements which Milly was bound to fulfil, and that his mother must at least keep her until June. There was a rather sharp conflict, of which Milly was not told until long afterwards, between them on this point. The upshot of it was that Lady Hernesdale yielded to Charlie's determination, and wrote a very gracious letter to Mrs. Fleming, asking her to let Milly stay with them a little longer; and, although Mrs. Fleming did not think it very wise, she finally consented.

But Lady Hernesdale began to say very bitter things in private, both to her husband and her son; and before long, she said bitter things to Milly too. Milly did not understand them at first.

"I don't quite know what your mother means," she said to Heron one day, more gravely than usual; "she has been talking a long time to me about the evils of poverty and of long engagements, and the fickleness of young men. Is it possible Charlie, that she means to insinuate that you are fickle, and that I shall be poor, and that our engagement is one that ought to be broken off?"

"I shouldn't wonder if she did," said the young man, sitting down on the arm of the easy chair in which Milly was sitting and getting hold of her hand.

"Do you think so?" said Milly, in the smallest possible voice.

"Of course I don't, you blessed little darling, but I think we are going to have hard times before us, if we don't look out."

"What do you mean, Charlie?"

"Her ladyship's got it into her head that the suit will go against you, and that Frances will take the property."

"We know Frances better than that!" said Milly.

"And she has an heiress in her eye for me; someone with even more money than you were supposed to have, little one!"

"And—do you mean to do what your mother wishes?"

"Suppose you beg my pardon for asking such an atrociously silly question. A kiss will do it; it's better than an apology—from you."

"But Charlie—if anything were to go wrong, should you mind very much?"

"Not a bit, my darling, so long as I had you."

"But your mother—"

"Well, she might kick up a dust about it; but so long as we two stick to each other, I think we might get along."

Milly sighed deeply, and the tears came into her eyes.

"But suppose you regret it—afterwards?"

"I'm not a cad, Milly."

"No, dear, but I have heard of men growing tired of their wives, and they were not all cads, either—at least as far as one could judge. If I were poor and had lost what they call my prettiness, and everyone said to you that I had ruined your life and that I was a poor thing to have sacrificed everything for—how would you feel, Charlie?"

"I should tell them that they told a pack of beastly lies," said Charlie. Then, in a deeper tone, "No, my dearest, what they said wouldn't affect me in the least. It is you I love, not your money, nor your face, but you; and as long as you don't change, I can swear that I shan't."

The vow of constancy has often been lightly made and lightly broken; but Charles Heron was a brave, honest young fellow, who would have thought it dishonor not to keep his word. He looked into her eyes, and she believed him; and in after years she found him worthy of her trust.

But when the moment of serious thought was over, they became like two children again, laughing over Lady

Hernesdale's plans, and mocking the very thought of wealth and grandeur. Lady Hernesdale's blood would have run cold if she had heard them talk. She scoffed finely at great houses and great entertainments, and they decided to live in a little house near Rushton, where they could see a great deal of their relations, yet not be bound by the ties of the great world.

It was perhaps his blood being fired by this prospect, that Charlie at last added in almost a whisper—

"Dear little woman, don't you think we had better make sure?"

Milly looked half frightened, half amused. "How can we make sure?" she said.

"By marrying each other straight off," said the tempter. "Then nobody could protest or be disagreeable or anything. Let's walk into a church and get married, Milly. Oh, I know there's a lot of bother before that; we should have to get a license, so as to avoid putting up banns, and all that sort of thing. But I could manage it quite easily, if you would say yes."

Milly was quite shocked. She had never thought of such a thing as marrying without her parents' consent, and she said so, very gravely and reprovingly.

"But, darling, you have their consent," said the casuist. "When fathers and mothers allow their daughters to become engaged to men, they generally expect marriage to follow, some time or other. Generally, I say. I shouldn't like to make a rule of it; but as a general thing. I think you may safely say that engaged people do marry."

"Oh, Charlie, how silly you are! But I couldn't be married without mother and Chloe, and the people that I know—I shouldn't feel as if I married at all."

"And the white satin gown and the bridesmaids, and the wedding-cake, and Mendelssohn's Wedding March, I suppose," said Lord Heron, rather wrathfully. "I thought these were the conventionalities of fashion that you had determined to give up!"

They had a pretty little quarrel after that. Milly protested that she did not care one iota for wedding-gowns and cakes, but that she wanted her own people to be present at her marriage. Charlie declared that she did not love him if she could talk of her own people as if they were a protection to her, against him. Then Milly sulked and would not speak to him. And Lady Hernesdale was charmed to observe that there seemed to be a coolness between the pair, that Milly's eyes were red, and that Charlie was in a furiously bad temper.

"You are going to the Ormes to-night, I suppose," she said to him at dinner.

"Certainly not, I am going with you and Milly to the opera."

"There will be plenty of time afterwards. We shall meet there, I dare say. I am quite longing to see Isabel Orme with all her diamonds on."

Charlie made no response, and Milly did not raise her eyes.

They found no opportunity of speaking to each other until later in the evening, when Charlie leaned over his chair in the opera-box, and whispered contritely.

"Have you forgiven me?"

"I don't know," said Milly very curtly. Then after a moment's silence: "Who is Isabel Orme?"

"Oh, don't you know? The heiress my mother wants me to marry instead of you."

"You are very unkind."

"I am not unkind at all."

Here the interview was interrupted; but when Lord Heron was taking his fiancée to the carriage, they resumed the interesting subject.

"I am sure your mother is not so worldly as you make her out to be."

"Very well," said Charlie, resignedly. "We'll play that she isn't."

"You won't like the girl with the diamonds better than me, will you?"

"Oh, Milly, you little witch, don't you know how I love you? And you don't care for me one bit."

"Yes—yes; a little bit."

"Not nearly as much as I care for you."

"Yes I do, Charlie—really."

"But you won't do what I ask you."

"I don't think that I dare," said the girl, flushing and quivering with some emotion that was half pleasure and half pain.

"Darling, won't you trust me?"

This time the answer was ready. "Oh yes, Charlie, with all my heart and soul."

And Lord Heron's cause was won.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

## THE IMMEDIATE EFFECTS.

Andrew Derrick was not very far away. He was in Paris when Lord Heron's letter reached him, enclosed in one from his father. His first plan had been to go further a-field, but he had been the victim of an incurable languor and melancholy, which had caused him to linger in Paris and lounge away his time as best he could in churches and galleries, in the Bois de Boulogne and on the Boulevards. It was not usual with him to like this sauntering life, but he was terribly depressed at this time; and also, he had a strange fear of going too far away, of being out of reach supposing that Chloe wanted him. He was in this mood when his father's letter was put into his hand; and he opened it carelessly, not expecting anything of interest. His father's letter was not interesting, certainly, but Andrew opened the note from Heron with some curiosity. He and Lord Heron had always been good friends, but not intimate with each other, and he was therefore somewhat surprised to see his crest upon the envelope.

The letter which Charlie Heron, under Milly's tutelage, had concocted, ran as follows:—

“Dear Old Chap,

“I wonder where you are just now and what you are doing. You might drop me a line and let me know. I am not sure whether I shall not feel inclined some day to come out and join you. Affairs are not going very straight with us here. My mother is keen on my marrying an heiress, and of course Miss Fleming won't do for me (in my lady's opinion) since the new will was found, leaving all Miss Kettlewell's money to Miss Wedderburn. Perhaps



you haven't heard of this change of fortune? The Flemings are the pluckiest people I know; they take it all as if it were a joke. But I must say that my mother doesn't like it much; and I'm afraid there's trouble in store for some of us. Yours always,

"Heron."

Charlie had not done his commission badly. He certainly showed in this letter some qualities which afterwards stood him in good stead in the diplomatic service.

The effect upon Andrew was instantaneous. He threw down the letter and sprang to his feet, his face glowing, his eyes alight with happiness. "What a blessing that I hadn't left Paris!" he exclaimed. And then he fell to work upon his portmanteau.

There was not a word of untruth in Charlie's letter, and yet it conveyed an impression which was very far from the facts. Andrew naturally leaped to the conclusion that the matter of the will was settled; that the Flemings had actually lost their money and were back again at Rushton—far from the hateful splendors of King's Leigh. This belief exhilarated him hugely. He made haste to get to the railway station and take the first train for Calais. Then on board the boat, and the train from Dover to London, and again from London to Rushton! The weather was warm, for summer had begun early that year, and he was tired with that rapid journey; but for all that, he was too restless to drive from the station to his father's house. He felt that a good walk of two or three miles, taking Rushton town on the way by a little detour, would refresh him exceedingly; and he therefore sent his baggage by an omnibus to his father's house, and started on his walk.

The day was just closing; a soft, subdued light filled the sky, and the west was red and golden still, as he stopped in front of Dr. Fleming's old red house in the town. It seemed to him to have recovered its home-like look; there were white curtains at the windows, and the door was half-

open as it had been in the days when he was always welcome there. As he stood at the gate, a rough-looking man passed by and eyed him curiously. Andrew felt as if his presence required an explanation. "I am wondering whether the doctor is at home," he said almost apologetically.

"Oh, ay, they're at home now," said the man. Except Miss Milly, as is oop i' London still."

"They have left King's Leigh?"

"I s'pose so. Munney's gone to somebody else, I heerd foalk say. Doan't know mooch about it, myself."

He moved away, but Andrew, in his new-born delight, offered him a shilling.

"Eh? what's this?" said the man, looking at the coin doubtfully. "I hev'n't yearned it, as I'm aweer on."

"Oh yes, you have; you've given me some good news," said Andrew.

"I've heerd tell that a fule an' his munney was soon parted; but I'd ne'er be the one to say the fule nay," said the man, as he pocketed the coin and strode away. Andrew laughed for pure lightness of heart. He opened the gate, walked straight up the flagged path, and in at the half-opened door.

Then he paused. Where should he go? What should he do next? The house seemed very silent and deserted. He stood in the hall, looking doubtfully to left and right. On his left hand was the doctor's consulting room; beyond it the surgery. The doors seemed to be open, and he heard the sound of someone moving in the surgery—making up a prescription, doubtless, for the doctor. It might be the assistant, or it might be the doctor; it might even—possibly—be Chloe herself. Andrew felt that he loved her better as a trained dispenser than as the mistress of King's Leigh.

He walked straight into the consulting-room, with a good deal of unnecessary noise. Then he heard the sounds in the surgery cease. And then—somebody in a white gown came into the consulting-room, and stood still.

"My father is not at home at present," said a sweet voice

out of the dimness, "but he will be back soon, and then you can—Andrew!"

She had not known him for a moment as he stood with his back to the window; but when he came a little nearer she recognized him even before she saw his face. Then he sprang forward, and took her by the hand.

"I have not come to see your father," he said, "I have come to see you."

"Me?" she said, in a strangely subdued tone. She was thinner and paler than she used to be, and she wore a gray dress and a white apron, which made her look like a hospital-nurse.

"You, Chloe, you! Oh, my darling, do you think that I could stay away?"

And before she could protest—if she had wanted to protest—his arms were round her, and her head was on his shoulder, where her dignity failed her in a burst of sudden tears. They startled Andrew inexpressibly; he had never seen her weep before.

"My darling! my dearest! Have I frightened you? Sweet, you love me, do you not? My own darling, why do you cry?"

"It is nothing—nothing," she said. "Only my own foolishness. Only that I have been so tired—so tired of it all."

"And you have wanted me?"

"Oh, so much—so much!"

"Forgive me, Chloe. It was my pride that stood in the way. Your riches would not let me speak. I felt as if it would be an unmanly thing for me to ask you to become my wife."

"And you are wiser," she said, quickly, as though she did not want him to go on.

"If I am not wiser, darling, I think Providence has been wise for us. I had a letter from Charlie Heron which brought me to your side."

"Charlie Heron? But why did he write to you about me?"

"It was not about you in particular, dearest, it was chiefly about Milly. But I could not stay away; I could not leave you to bear your troubles all alone—and when I heard the news that made me free to ask you to be my wife, why, then I came at once."

"But—I do not altogether understand," began Chloe. Then she started back, coloring deeply, and turning her face towards the door. But Andrew would not relinquish his hold upon her hand.

It was Dr. Fleming who entered, just returned from a round of visits; and at first, even his keen eyes failed to distinguish the figures before him. "Hello; who have we here?" he said, "Why, God bless my soul! is it you Andrew? Eh?—and what the deuce are you doing with Chloe's hand?"

"I have been asking her to be my wife, sir," said Andrew, drawing her forward.

The doctor sat down in his study chair, and looked at them.

"Well," he said, "you seem to have lost no time. When did you come back?"

"This evening," said Andrew, smiling.

"I thought so. I met your father just now and he told me you were in Paris and likely to remain there."

"He will have found out his mistake by this time," said Andrew. "I have sent on my things. May I have Chloe, doctor?"

"With all my heart, as far as I am concerned. But Chloe is independent. She will have to give you her answer herself. I don't pretend to dictate to Chloe now-a-days."

"Are you still so willful?" Andrew asked her, with a smile. "Chloe, I need have no doubt, need I? You will have me, will you not?"

"If you want me, Andrew." And she stretched out one hand to him and one to her father, who rose and kissed her, and then shook hands gravely with his future son-in-

law. "You must take care of her," he said. "She will want much help, much love, much guidance, in the life that lies before her; and I would sooner give her into your charge, Andrew, than into that of anyone I know."

There was a touch of solemnity in his words and look which touched yet rather astounded Andrew Derrick. But he responded heartily to the father's appeal.

"I will always do my very best to make her happy, sir. No need to say I will always love her—it would be impossible to do otherwise—but I can promise also to work for her, to serve her, to give her a happy home—"

Whereat Dr. Fleming suddenly chuckled. "It's scarcely in your power to do that, my man. She has a home already."

The first thrill of doubt and fear shot through Andrew's heart. He looked round at Chloe, whose eyes were fixed half fearfully upon his face. "But—you have lost King's Leigh!" he said.

"Lost King's Leigh?" said Dr. Fleming, with a laugh. "Not a bit of it, Andrew. Oh, you have heard of that new will, I suppose? But you see—who's that?"

Again the door had opened—gently this time, and somebody looked in. It was an evening of surprises. Dr. Fleming strode to the door and grasped Lord Heron by the hand.

"Heron, my dear boy! what is it? Nothing wrong? Milly—is she ill?"

"Not at all," said Heron, with a pleasant but rather nervous laugh. "She's as fit as a fiddle, and so am I. She's lurking in the hall—afraid to come in."

"Afraid?" said the doctor, while Chloe sprang to the door, on which, however, Heron still held his hand.

"Don't be in a hurry," he said. "We've sent up-stairs for Mrs. Fleming, too; we want to have the thing in style, don't you know. Now then!"

He opened the door, while the spectators stared at him as though he had gone mad. He did not look very mad, but he was flushed with something like suspense and ex-

citement. He put out his hand and drew Milly, also flushed and excited and rather frightened, into the room.

"Allow me to present Lady Heron to the assembled company," said Charlie. And Milly flung herself straight into her father's arms.

"What does the fellow mean? Why, Milly, my little Milly, how well you are looking, child! Crying and laughing too? Here's your mother; I must hand you over to her."

But Milly, still clinging to him, sobbed out something like—"Don't be angry with us, daddy; we are very sorry—"

"We'll never do it again," said Charlie, beaming with pride and conscious shamefacedness; as he stood at the doctor's elbow.

The doctor looked from one to the other. "You don't mean—"

"We're married," said Charlie stoutly. "By special license. I was over age, and you know we had your consent, sir, for consent to an engagement means consent to a marriage, so we had no trouble over that; and we thought we had better come away at once and tell you about it."

"We've left a letter for Lady Hernesdale,"—said Milly anxiously. "She will be very angry. You won't be angry too, will you, dad?"

"I don't know," said the doctor. "What made you act in this way, Heron? It was hardly fair to my daughter, I think. You had no reason for a clandestine marriage, when everything was arranged—"

"Fact is, I thought things were getting disarranged, sir," said Charlie. "When we heard about the King's Leigh business and the will, my mother was—well, somewhat annoyed; and rather than that anything should come between my darling and myself, I persuaded her to marry me at once, so that we might not be divided under any circumstances. I hope you will excuse my precipitation; but even if you don't, why, Milly's my wife and she loves me—and I'm content."

"Milly married! Oh, Milly, darling and without me!" Mrs. Fleming said.

"That was the greatest difficulty of all that I had to contend with," Lord Heron said. "She could not bear to think that you were not with her; but I told her we would both come here immediately afterwards, and that I was sure you would forgive us."

"I suppose there is nothing else for us to do," said Dr. Fleming ruefully; "but I must say there was no need to be in such a hurry. What your parents will say, Lord Heron, I really cannot tell."

"I don't think it matters much, do you father?" said Milly, whose look of fright and guilt had given way to a sort of contrite twinkle. "As long as we have Cousin Keturah's money, as mother tells me we probably shall, in spite of the scare about the will, Lady Hernesdale will be perfectly happy. And in any case, so shall we."

"But what does it mean?" whispered Andrew to his lady-love, detaining her for a moment in the hall, as the others dispersed to various rooms; "have you not lost that money? was I the victim of a hoax?"

His tone was so stern, that Chloe hastened to reply with double gentleness.

"I am sure you were not. But the will left everything to our friend Frances, and she maintains that she will not accept the money. Besides, the authorities do not think that the will would hold. Andrew dear, now that you have come back to me you will not let that wretched money be any barrier between us?"

He hesitated a moment; then lightened his hold upon her, and kissed her on the lips.

"Whatever happens," he said deliberately, "I cannot let you go."

"But Chloe," he added, after a pause of perfect happiness, "tell me one thing. Someone told me you had all left King's Leigh. That was why I walked straight into

this house. Of course I thought that you had all been turned out, and lost the money and everything."

"Dear boy! I am so glad you thought so," Chloe answered. "But we only came here for a week, because Mrs. Green said that King's Leigh wanted 'a regular, right-down, good spring clean.'"

Andrew was vanquished and confessed as much.



## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

## THE PERPLEXITY OF LAVINIA WEDDERBURN.

As Mr. Wedderburn had told Laurence Corbet, he had written his resignation of the post he filled at Zion Lane. He had put it on the score of failing health, and it overwhelmed the congregation with dismay. The Rushton Dissenters were very enthusiastic about Mr. Wedderburn. They maintained that "the Church" had not a preacher to compare with him; and they flocked in crowds on Sunday evenings to the bare little chapel, and filled it to suffocation. It was for this reason that they had so ambitiously determined upon building a new chapel, and that the subscriptions had fallen in so fast. But all would be altered if Mr. Wedderburn went away.

Two deputations were sent to interview Mr. Wedderburn on the subject. It was unfortunate the members said, that Mr. Derrick, who was so influential a man at Zion Lane Chapel, was on each occasion unable to attend. He sent very polite excuses, and expressed a hope that Mr. Wedderburn would yield, if possible, to the desire of the committee; but Mr. Wedderburn remained unmoved.

He knew well enough why Matthew Derrick would not come. The sturdy old miller, with his strict notions of honor and honesty, would keep silence; but he would not join other people in begging Silas Wedderburn to stay. His head dropped when the deacons talked of the loss to their "Cause," if Mr. Wedderburn went. And once he said rather abruptly, "If Mr. Wedderburn does what he thinks right, I don't suppose that the Lord will let either him or us be the losers."

And the deacons, who did not quite understand him, said afterwards that Mr. Derrick must have a very high opinion

of Mr. Wedderburn, because he spoke as if the minister had great power in prayer. Which was not in the least what Mr. Derrick had meant at all.

But he did not tell to anyone the few words he exchanged one day with Mr. Wedderburn when they met in a solitary place—a lane not far from Derrick's mill, where the minister had been visiting a sick child. Silas would have passed him without a word, only lifting his hat with a certain humility of manner as he went by; but Mr. Derrick stopped and held out his big red hand.

"I've a word to say to you, Mr. Wedderburn. You and me—we may have had a brush, and for the time, as you know, I was ready to come down on you if everything was not square; but you acted quite fairly in the long run, though late; and I do not see that a thing like that need hinder you from going on with your work here. If that's the reason you're resigning, think better of it, sir. You'll do good work yet."

He was looking down as he spoke, and stumping the ground with his stick; he did not see that his appeal brought tears into Silas Wedderburn's eyes. The minister answered, after a moment's thought, in a careful and deliberate way.

"You are very kind, sir, very kind. I have reasons of my own for resigning as well as the one you mention, which certainly was also present in my mind. If I could stay, I would. But I must go."

"I am sorry for it; sorry if anything I've said or done should have induced you to leave, Mr. Wedderburn. However, if you must go, you must. You'll preach again—farewell sermon, I suppose—before you leave?"

Mr. Wedderburn shook his head. "My strength would not be equal to such an exertion," he replied.

"But the people! the congregation, you must think of them!" said Mr. Derrick in remonstrance. "You must say good-bye to them some time or other. And you can't speak to 'em all separately. What do you think of a tea? A fare-

well tea? You could say something, long or short, at a farewell tea."

The minister drew a long breath. "Yes," he said rather dreamily. "I could say something, certainly, at a farewell tea."

"I'll arrange for it then," said Mr. Derrick with alacrity. "I will consult with others and let you know the day. I am glad to have met you, Mr. Wedderburn. Good-day, sir, good-day."

He shook hands cordially with the minister, whom he liked much better after this little explanation, and walked away. Silas Wedderburn remained standing for a little while, and then moved on, slowly and rather dizzily; somebody who met him five minutes afterwards declared that he looked as if he had got his death-blow. It was plainly to be seen that "poor Mr. Wedderburn" was very ill.

Lavinia, in the meantime, was furious. She was extremely angry with Silas, with Frances, with the Flemings; but chiefly angry with Fate (or Providence) which seemed likely to wrest her prey from her hands, and baulk her schemes of revenge on other people. It was really small use to badger Silas about the wedding-day. After all, she would now gain very little by marrying him; he would have nothing to leave, and the congregation did not know her sufficiently well to offer her a pension. Then the better side of her leaped up—the side that was not absorbed in money-grabbing—the side of her queer but undying personal attachment to Silas. She was attached to him; there was no doubt of that; and she wanted to feel that he belonged to her for a little while, even if he died so soon; she wanted to nurse him, to go in and out of his room without question, to have the nearness, if not the dearness, of a wife. She believed too, that she could cure his disease if she had him to herself. She had great faith in her own astuteness and specifics, and did not believe a word the doctors said. Heart-disease, indeed? it was nothing but indigestion. Good food and good exercise, and plenty of

open air; these were what Silas wanted, and if he had her for a wife, she would see that he soon got well. But she was wise enough to see that she had better keep a good many of these sentiments to herself. Silas was bent upon leaving Rushton; well and good. She would get him away to a quiet little seaside place and there he would marry her. She had more money "put away" than anybody knew. It would maintain them for a time. How they should live when that was spent she did not know; but she thought it possible that Silas would be able to take an occasional service, or speak at a missionary meeting; where he would be paid for his assistance. If not, she would have to find something that she could do and surely, Frances Wedderburn would not be so hard-hearted as to refuse to assist them?

Her annuity would, of course, be sacrificed, if Miss Kettlewell's last-found will were accepted. In that case, Frances would probably make the loss good to her. "She could not do less," Miss Wedderburn said, with conviction. And if the other will stood its ground, Lavinia's income was still secure. So she did not consider that she need feel much anxiety on that score.

But she had failed a little where she had most emphatically wished to succeed. She had not retained Silas's affection; he seemed to regard her with positive loathing. And she had not carried out her scheme of revenge very satisfactorily on the Flemings. She had carried off the paper from Miss Kettlewell's box on the night of the old lady's death, as Chloe had believed and suggested; and on seeing what it was, she had carefully held it back until the two girls had grown accustomed to their wealth, and Milly was actually engaged to a lord, "who would be sure to throw her over," Miss Wedderburn said, "if he found that she had no money after all."

Well, she had thrown her bomb. And it seemed to have fizzed and gone out. The lawyer had waited on Frances and on the Flemings—to no effect. Frances refused to

have anything to do with the matter; the Flemings had been more discomposd by the discovery that Frances was Miss Wedderburn's cousin than by the fear that they would lose their wealth; and Dr. Fleming had laughed the whole thing to scorn. "Everyone knew that poor old Keturah was off her head more or less for those last few weeks," he said. "Her conduct at the ball showed it; her delirium about Frances herself emphasized it. The will was worth the paper it was written on and nothing more. But he begged that Miss Wedderburn should bring her contention to the courts, for his daughters would not for one moment remain at King's Leigh if any other person had a better claim to it."

Miss Wedderburn considered that all this was mere bravado. Frances was the heiress to King's Leigh; and if she had been told earlier that Frances was Silas's daughter, she would have acted more quickly (though she did not say so in public; she would not have allowed the Flemings to enter the house at all. What Frances said or thought did not matter; she was a minor, and her nearest relations must act for her; Miss Wedderburn was almost her nearest relation and had the right to act. She hoped in time to be the recipient of Frances's gratitude. But the thing that was bitter to her was the small effect produced upon the Flemings' health and spirits. They did not seem less cheerful than before. Everyone was as friendly to them as everyone had been before. And when after a few days, it leaked out that Lord Heron had married Milly "on the spot," as soon as ever he heard of the possible loss of fortune; and that Andrew Derrick had come home at the first word of it, in order to engage himself to Chloe, then indeed Miss Wedderburn felt that her cup was full. She was inclined to exclude herself in her room and to say—"What good does my life do me?" But she refrained—for the sake of others, as she placidly told herself.

The only crumb of comfort that remained to her was this proposal of a farewell tea. Miss Wedderburn's experience

of farewell teas was that they generally ended in substantial benefits to the person on whose behalf they were given. Visions of silver teapots, of gold watches, of purses full of sovereigns, loomed before her eyes. Surely the congregation of Zion Lane would not be so remiss as to let their esteemed pastor depart without a donation in precious metal and coin of the realm!

She soon found that she had conjectured right. The congregation was going wild over a subscription list. It was carefully kept from the minister's knowledge, but Miss Wedderburn was consulted respecting the nature of the gifts. After great deliberation with herself, she replied that a gold watch would be an admirable gift; and that if there was any money left, it might be handed to Mr. Wedderburn in a purse. And report said that there would be a good deal to go into the purse, for Mr. Derrick, amongst others, had made a very large contribution to the fund.

Lavinia showed her discretion in not mentioning these details to Mr. Wedderburn; she saved them up, so to speak, and meant to pour them into his ears afterwards. She forgot herself a little on one occasion. Two or three days before the meeting, Silas asked her abruptly whether Frances was at King's Leigh or at Denstone. "I should like her to come to this meeting," he said.

"It would be very nice," Miss Wedderburn agreed. She was quite surprised indeed by the good sense of the suggestion.

"So good for Frances to see how the people appreciate you," she said. "I don't think she understands how great your powers are, and how much you are beloved. It would be very nice if she could hear all the good things they are sure to say about you, and—supposing even they were to give you some little present, some testimonial—"

"Don't let them mention such a thing," said Silas, almost fiercely.

"But suppose they have mentioned it! Suppose they intend to give you—oh, I must not tell you what!"

"I shall take nothing from them, so they will only waste their money," Mr. Wedderburn declared; and walked out of the drawing-room with a gray, stricken look upon his face, which almost perplexed Lavinia, although she was not easily frightened.

"Does he mean to refuse it all at the meeting?" she asked herself. "Oh, he would never be such a fool! Surely, surely, he would not do such a thing! How terrible for me!"

But she was reassured when she saw that he had been writing letters to the very people to whom she had never dared to write to be present. Had he asked them? She could not tell; but she saw that the notes were addressed to Frances, to Laurence Corbet, to Dr. Fleming; and she wished that she could get them into her own hands for a few moments and discover their contents! But Silas was too careful of his letters. He posted them with his own hands, and Miss Wedderburn was only able to make vague guesses at their contents.

The tea-meeting was to be held in the Zion Lane school-room. There was to be a tea first, and speaking afterwards. The chief ladies of the congregation presided at trays, in the old-fashioned style; and the plates were loaded with buns, bread and butter, and buttered seed-cake and curd cheese-cakes, and other delicacies of Lincolnshire fare, in the most lavish and superior manner. Miss Wedderburn presided at one tray; but she disappointed her neighbors a good deal when she remarked that Mr. Wedderburn was not well enough to join in the tea, but would come to the meeting afterwards. It was felt that the hilarity of the occasion was a little dampened by the absence of the minister.

But when the tea-trays were cleared away, and the benches turned and filled by an eager and perspiring crowd, nothing could have been greater than the enthusiasm created by the first appearance of Mr. Wedderburn, in company with his deacons, on the platform at one end of the room—

a platform covered with red cloth and decorated largely with palms from Mr. Derrick's greenhouse and a huge bouquet of roses on the table. Mr. Wedderburn, who looked very white about the lips, was obliged to rise and bow; and then a deacon of the church, whose name was Byles, was asked to take the chair.



## CHAPTER XXXIX.

## THE PRESENTATION.

It was almost at the same moment that a little party, conducted by Mr. Derrick, entered the class-room which formed a sort of ante-chamber to the school-room proper. The class-room was at one end of the platform and always appropriated to the use of speakers or performers. Mr. Derrick, who knew this, had brought his private party round that way, and now seated three of his companions on the front seat, though well to the side, while the remaining one remained out of sight of the audience, just inside the door.

There was a slight buzz of astonishment amongst the people on the benches in the school-room. For Mr. Derrick had brought distinguished visitors. There was Mr. Corbet of Denstone, for instance; who would have expected to see him there? That Mr. Corbet's ward was Mr. Wedderburn's daughter had scarcely penetrated the mind of the Zion Lane congregation; they would not have attached much importance to the fact! But Mr. Corbet's appearance at one of the Zion Lane festivities was a most exciting incident, which would probably be done full justice to by the local reporter. It was also considered very extraordinary that Dr. Fleming should be present. The feud between Lavinia Wedderburn and the Flemings was well known; and as Andrew Derrick, also known to be engaged to Chloe, followed with his father, the excitement became intense. There was great anxiety to see who it was who had accompanied them and stood inside the class-room door—much craning of heads and much conjecture among the younger part of the audience. For it was rumored that the gentlemen had brought with them a female of some kind or another; and while one person guessed that it might be Miss

Fleming and another that it was Lady Heron, very few reflected that it was more likely to be the minister's daughter, Frances Wedderburn.

Silas had written three short letters, begging his daughter, Mr. Corbet and Dr. Fleming to be present at the meeting. Each had consented to come, and each from different reasons; Frances came, because her heart yearned over the father whom she longed to help and could not save; Laurence, because he was ashamed of his own bitterness and violence in his conversation with Mr. Wedderburn; Dr. Fleming, chiefly from curiosity, and a professional interest in the minister's physical condition. Not that Mr. Wedderburn had of late been attended to by him; he had called in Dr. Spencer instead of Dr. Fleming; but Dr. Fleming knew enough of his condition and temperament to be a little anxious about the effect of this exciting occasion upon him. Andrew came because his father wished it, and also because he could not help seeing that Mr. Derrick was pursued by a kind of haunting nervousness, which he could neither suppress nor explain.

Mr. Byles, the red-faced chairman—a butcher in private life—made the opening speech. He dilated strongly on the sorrow they all felt at the resignation of Mr. Wedderburn, especially as it was on account of his health; he enlarged for some time on his many merits and virtues, and he hoped that this great and unexpected blow would not affect the subscription-list for the new building. Then he sat down rather helplessly, and was applauded a great deal, but got up again to request Mr. Derrick to speak. Meanwhile Silas Wedderburn sat in a prominent position on the right of the chairman, and with one hand shading his eyes, preserved an inscrutable passivity. Miss Wedderburn sat opposite him, in the middle of the front bench; she was smiling persistently, but the smile was somewhat forced.

Mr. Derrick ascended the platform steps, with a marked slowness, which looked almost like reluctance. He had been forced into a position which he did not care to fill.

As senior deacon, it was his place to make the presentation of the gold watch and purse of sovereigns to the retiring preacher; and he did not like doing it. It was not that he disapproved of the gift, indeed he had given a large donation himself, and was particularly anxious that the purse should contain a handsome amount; but he did not like presenting it in his own person to the man whom he had almost charged with dishonesty. There was a good deal of delicacy of feeling underneath Matthew Derrick's lion-like exterior; and it was decidedly with outraged susceptibilities that he prepared to make the laudatory speech that was expected of him, and to make the presentation of the congregation's farewell gifts.

To most people his manner seemed much as usual; it was often rather gruff and formidable; but Andrew made a quick comment upon it in Dr. Fleming's ear "What ails my father? He's not speaking from his heart a bit. And look at Wedderburn."

Dr. Fleming shrugged his shoulders and twitched his eyebrows in a way that he had when he was disturbed. "There'll be a scene presently," he said. "What made Laurence—I say, Laurence, can't you get Frances out of this?"

Laurence looked round at him with a strange expression in his eyes. But he asked no question. He had seen, as Dr. Fleming and Andrew had seen, the extraordinary gesture with which Silas Wedderburn had received the opening sentences of Derrick's somewhat faltering speech. He had half started up, wrung his hands together as if in argument, then seated himself again in a cowering attitude with both elbows on his knees and his hands pressed over his face. It was an incongruous attitude, as of shame or humility, to be taken in the presence of those who were complimenting him and crowning him with honor. The audience, in general, took the exhibition of feeling for a singular modesty and natural grief at leaving Rushton, but the audience was composed of simple folk. Those who knew Silas Wedder-

burn's nature saw that there was something more than this. Even Miss Wedderburn was looking grave.

Laurence rose from his seat and made his way to the class-room door, which was partially screened by a green curtain, behind which he found Frances, who was standing well out of sight, but in a place from which she could get a good view of her father.

"Don't you think we had better come away?" Laurence whispered to her.

"No! what for?" said Frances in amaze.

"It's so dull," he said, hesitating to give her the true reason of his thoughts.

"Dull! No, it isn't dull; but isn't it a little—strange?"

"How strange?"

"People seem unnatural, somehow. I suppose because they are at high tension. Mr. Derrick's not a bit like himself. And—my father, I don't think—he—likes it, at all."

"Come away then."

"No, no, I mean to stay to the end."

Laurence fell back; he could say no more. But he remained behind her, watching Wedderburn over her head; and wishing himself and the whole company well out of the business. For it began to be borne in upon him that there would be trouble before the end. Silas Wedderburn was waxing dangerous beneath the monotonous sentences which Matthew Derrick was piling above his head.

The end of the deacon's speech approached at last.

"And in token of the love and respect which your people bear to you and in the hope that they may be permitted to wish you God-speed, and to show in a substantial manner our regards for yourself and our gratitude for your ministrations, we beg of you, sir, to accept from us the gold watch with a suitable inscription which has been subscribed for by, I believe, every member of your congregation, and by several other admirers who are not members; and also this purse

which contains fifty sovereigns, and a check for one hundred pounds as well."

Mr. Derrick read the last few sentences from a paper. The amount took a good many of his hearers by surprise. It was never known how much, exactly, Mr. Derrick himself had given, but the greater part of the hundred pound check was generally ascribed to him by people who knew best.

There was vehement applause at the end of the speech. Then the gold watch was produced, solemnly exhibited in full sight of the audience, and laid on the table in front of Mr. Wedderburn. The purse was placed by its side. It was noticed that he made no effort to handle his new possessions; he kept his hands over his face and did not even look at them. The people waited almost breathlessly. They were rather accustomed to "sensations" when Mr. Wedderburn preached; they expected now to hear something overwhelmingly eloquent, heart-searching, pathetic. Two or three of the women had got their handkerchiefs ready when Silas Wedderburn arose from his chair.

He arose—a strange, gaunt figure; for he had grown thin lately and the lines of his tall frame seemed oddly angular; his face white and the dark eyes burning with passion underneath the stormy brows, the long hands thrust out as though to put away from him some suggestion of evil, some temptation of the devil.

The first words he uttered bore witness to his mood.

"Get thee behind me, Satan!" he thundered—and then stood still. There was a strange thrill in the audience. Women settled themselves in their seats uneasily; men looked at each other as if they thought either that the minister was feigning, or that he had gone stark, staring mad. The chairman rose to his feet; Derrick backed a little, so as to be out of the way, but did not leave the platform. Sooth to say, he and Dr. Fleming both thought that Silas Wedderburn's mind was unhinged. They waited for his next words in unspeakable suspense. Would the man rave, or would he explain his startling ejaculation?

Mr. Wedderburn had let his hands drop to his sides; his eyes were on the ground; he looked as if he were collecting his thoughts. Suddenly he looked up and spoke.

It has been mentioned that he had a very fine voice; of late its strength and clearness had diminished, its melody been marred. Now it rose again, as he continued to speak, with all the sweetness and beauty of his earlier days; and those who had never heard him before, or had heard him only in Rushton, now realized that this man had had committed to him a most amazing gift, and that the stories which had been told of his speeches and sermons in bygone days were probably true. He had done much in Rushton, but he had never spoken like this before. For the first and only time in her life, Frances heard her father at his best.

He began in low tones that increased in volume as he went on.

"That," he said, "was the first thought in my mind. Get thee behind me—Satan! It seems a strange thing to say when you have just shown me this sign of your friendliness; when you have gathered yourselves together to do me honor, and to make me gifts. I am not insensible to your kindness; I feel it from the very bottom of my heart, and I thank you most sincerely, most heartily, for the love you have shown me, and honor that you wish to heap upon my unworthy head.

"If only you knew how great is the temptation to me to accept them with love and gratitude, you would not be surprised to hear me bid Satan depart from me. I would not requite your kindness with unkindness, your love with hate; I would give worlds, if I had them to give, rather than hurt the feelings of any who are here. But—better than gold or silver is the honest truth; it is truth that saves a man's soul, and I stand here for truth's sake to-night."

Thence, for two or three minutes, he fell into the preacher's vein, and spoke of right and wrong, of God's claim to the soul, and the soul's attitude to God, in burning words of eloquent appeal which lingered long in the minds of

those who heard him speak. It seemed as if the subject had suddenly fired him; he spoke as a dying man to dying men that night; and it was impossible to listen and not to believe that he was in earnest—deadly earnest, and perfectly sincere.

And yet—there were men present, there was his daughter present—who knew the depths of weakness to which this man could sink in his uninspired moments, in times, when, as he would have said, he was not upheld by the Hand of God. These men listened with eyes cast down, with feelings of almost sick revolt at what seemed to them a mere show of words, a mere rhetorical display. Not one of them believed in Silas Wedderburn's religion; one of them at least, considered it simply a cloak for cowardice and dishonesty. To them it was painful to listen to the minister's rhapsody, beautiful although the words might be; they knew, or thought they knew, the speck in that ripe fruit, the black core at the heart. And for the daughter's sake, as well as for the faith in which they believed, they stood abashed and ashamed.

"Come away, Frances," said Laurence, with sternness in his tone.

"No," she said quietly. "I shall stay to the end." Then she cast one hurried glance backward into his gloomy face and there was a strange, tearful sweetness in her own. "Don't you understand?" she said, "Don't you see what he is going to do?"

No, Laurence did not see; could not imagine; could not understand. But as he set himself again to listen, he knew that a change had come—the eloquent voice was hushed, there was a dead pause, during which no one dared to applaud. The audience thought of that night in the chapel when the minister had paused in almost the same way, and wondered whether his brain and memory had failed him once again. But it was not so. He took up the word again, after that moment's pause, but in an entirely different tone. Less sweet, less musical certainly, but shaken by

an intensity of feeling which no one could fail to understand.

"These are my last words to you all," he said. "That is why I have allowed myself to speak once more to you of the things that pertain to your peace; to remind you of your need of salvation and of the love of God. I shall lift up my voice no more, either to you or to others, concerning these things. The time I have now will be all too short for me to make my peace with God. And I have resolved"—his voice grew hoarse and thick—"to put away every earthly thing that comes between me and God.

"Your gifts, my dear friends, I cannot accept; I will take no gift from you but prayers. You have been kinder—far kinder to me—than I deserve; and God will reward you for it. I should be glad, therefore, if you would make these gifts of yours, gifts to God instead of to me. Let them go to the building of your new chapel. I thank you all, my dear friends, very heartily; but I will take nothing—nothing from your hands."

And here he paused and his face turned whiter, and there was a great tumult in the room, some crying "No, no," and others clapping and stamping, and here and there a growl of dissatisfaction or something very like a hiss. For Rushton folks had been proud of this gift and did not like to see it, as they thought, despised.



## CHAPTER XL

## EXPIATION.

"Does he mean it?" murmured Andrew Derrick into Dr. Fleming's ear. For Andrew, knowing nothing, had caught the infection of distrust.

"I believe to God he does!" the doctor answered back. The tone showed how much he was surprised. His suspicions had gone deeper than he knew. As for Matthew Derrick, he was staring at Silas Wedderburn, as if he could not believe his ears. And Laurence, withdrawn into the shadow, laid his hand on Frances's hand, with his arm half around her waist. He felt her trembling, and feared lest she should faint. She was quite unconscious of the protecting clasp.

2 The murmur among the listeners grew loud and deep. Several persons rose to protest; blank dismay sat upon the faces of the chairman and his supporters. One or two of the chief men made a little group round Mr. Wedderburn and tried to persuade him to alter his mind. But the minister only shook his head and waved his hand. Presently he came forward a little, as if he wished to be heard, and the audience settled itself into dissatisfied silence as he spoke. But Silas Wedderburn's calmness had failed him now. He cast one hasty glance round the room, and, for the first time, he saw his daughter's face. He caught her eyes blazing into his own, with an expression of pleasant satisfaction—of love, maybe—such as he had never seen before. He caught his breath, and his very lips went white. He clutched at his neck as if he wanted to loosen the clothes that seemed to choke him, and then once more he spoke.

"Oh, brothers and sisters," he said, "if you but knew the

torture that it is to me to see your friendly eyes, to hear your kindly words, you would be silent and leave me to die in peace. Nay, I must tell you before you go that I am not what I seem, that my life has been a lie, that I stand before you a coward, a liar, a criminal—guilty of all that you think most base and vile!”

“For God’s sake, stop him,” said Laurence in Dr. Fleming’s ear. He had quitted Frances’s side to say the words. “Don’t you see that the man has gone stark, staring, raving mad!”

Dr. Fleming was on his feet already, on the platform in one moment at the minister’s side. And most of those who saw him knew what his appearance signified. Mr. Wedderburn was raving—as to that there could be no doubt. The doctor laid one hand on the minister’s arm, Matthew Derrick came to the other side; between them they tried to silence him, to lead him away. He broke loose from them easily enough—he had strange strength at that moment—and when he spoke again, the whole audience sat as silent as if they scarcely dared to breathe.

“I have been a self-deceiver from the first,” said Silas Wedderburn, quite quietly now. “When I first went out to the South Seas even, many years ago, I craved to be a leader of men. I loved myself, my reputation, my name and fame. I thought—vain fool as I was—that the world could not do without me. And in the hour of peril, when there came a choice as to which should die, myself or my little daughter, I took the first chance myself and left her to the mercy of the flames, because I thought my own a life too valuable to be sacrificed for a child’s sake. You that are fathers and mothers, would you not have striven that your child should be saved before yourselves? But I left her to die.”

There was a pause, during which a strange murmur ran through the room. The women sobbed; the men held down their heads and looked dark. One or two people left the place altogether. The air seemed full of tragedy.

"The child was saved, but not by me," the tired, discouraged voice went on. "She was brought up by others—not by me. I did not care—I cared for nothing but success. I preached for vanity; praise was the breath of life to me, and I ceased to struggle with my faults; or to try, in my heart of hearts to serve my God. I lived extravagantly, self indulgently; I was burdened with debt when I came here. And when your money, my friends, came into my hands, I tell you I paid my debts with it instead of handing it over to your treasurer; I stole it from you as a thief—a thief in the night. I owe it only to my friends—to men like Mr. Corbet and Mr. Derrick—that I am not in the county jail, and branded as a criminal before the world!

"But I brand myself. I ask for justice on myself. I call God to witness that I repent of my sin—that I pray—that I ask you to pray for me. God be merciful to me a sinner! So maybe, He will accept—as an expiation—the shame of it, the pain of it—ah, my God!—the punishment!—"

The voice broke in a cry that seemed hardly human. The arms of the two men beside him received him as he fell backwards. He had spoken for the last time to the people of Zion Lane.

"Let me come to him! Let me speak to him!" said Frances, throwing herself upon her knees at his side, and hanging over him with such tears, such tender fervor, that all who saw her knew the secret of that relationship which had been so long concealed. "Father! father!" she cried, as he lay flat upon the boards of the platform, while the schoolroom was hastily cleared of the crowd by Andrew Derrick and one of the deacons, who went about reiterating that Mr. Wedderburn had not known what he was saying, that he was subject to hallucinations, and the like. "Father, father! speak to me!" Frances cried, with all the cruel yearning for one last word which we have all felt or must yet feel when those who love us come into the valley of the shadow, where they do not even hear our voice or feel our hand. Was it not too late for the word of love that she so strongly desired to hear?

There was one last little rally—one last flicker of light. He opened his eyes a moment, and looked into Frances's face.

"Child—forgive me," he said.

And that was the last word that Silas Wedderburn spoke on earth.

She forgave—ah, yes, she forgave; everyone must needs forgive when that last confession has been made, that last prayer uttered for his pardon, that last terrible atonement offered to the world. He was a man of great gifts, but he had marred them all; and, as Laurence Corbet at least, believed, the day of his degeneration had begun when he found himself not brave enough to lay down his own life for his child's. There had been good in him, but not strength enough to meet temptation; and yet it would have taken little at one point in his life, to turn him into the path where he would surely have grown into a saint. He took the lower road—until the hour of his death.

His friends came about him and carried him back to his own house, where Lavinia Wedderburn met them with a face of stone. She had not waited for the ending of the scene. It had seemed to her too madly fantastic to be borne. And when she saw the way in which he was brought back to her, she set her lips a little tighter and said only, "It is better so." Perhaps indeed it was.

She would let no one remain with her. She herself did for him all that there was to be done. And then she shut up the house and mourned alone. But no one ever saw her shed a tear.

And Frances, driven away from her father's side, clung to Laurence, with heart-breaking sighs and tears, and with a cry which, even in that hour of darkness, his heart leaped to hear; "Oh, Laurence, take me home!"

His house was her home henceforward, as it had never been before; her heart had turned to him of its own accord, now that she had no one else in the whole world to love. For, in spite of her condemnation of her father's actions, she had loved him from her childhood, with the strong si-

lent love of a nature which cannot take back what had once been given—not even love.

There was a great gathering at the funeral of Silas Wedderburn. His coffin was covered with flowers, and people came from far and near to show their respect for the man who had dared to confess a fault and to refuse a gift which he had not deserved. But little by little the story grew obscure, and the extenuation of his fault began. It was said that his confession meant little save the outpourings of his humility; that he had lived a blameless life, and that one must not judge a man by his self-accusations, more especially in the hour of his death. And when people came to Laurence Corbet, or Mr. Derrick, for explanation, these two men kept their mouths resolutely shut. There was nothing for them to say, they both averred. And in time, the world believed them, and Silas Wedderburn's name was reckoned amongst those that bear no stain.

The watch was sent to Frances, as a memorial of her father, and the hundred and fifty pounds were given, as he had wished, to the building of the chapel. Miss Wedderburn took possession, unchallenged, of all the things that he had left, and, shortly after his death, vanished from the neighborhood and was never seen in it again. The paper that she had placed in the lawyer's hands, caused a good deal of stir; and she herself was summoned to give evidence, but did not appear. The law-suit dragged on in a weary way for many months, but neither Frances nor the Flemings allowed it to impair their friendship or their happiness. Lord and Lady Heron remain unreconciled to the Hernesdales, but the alienation did not trouble them quite so much as perhaps it ought to have done. Chloe and Andrew Derrick married, in the hope that the Flemings would lose their suit, for Andrew had found work to do that exactly suited him, and did not want to give it up. And Denstone was shut up, while Laurence went abroad. And Frances—

Frances found that she could be content.

## CHAPTER XLI.

## CLEAR SHINING AFTER RAIN.

There is a little town on the Italian Riviera, which its enemies call dull, and its friends "a haven of peace." There is no band, no pier, no promenade, no casino, no games of chance; but there are gardens of lemon-trees and oranges, there are vines crimsoned with the sun, there is a wealth of roses, of all shades; and on the hillsides there are the gray-green olive trees planted on terraces from which you catch divine glimpses of the Mediterranean blue. There is a rather squalid little Indian town, dominated by a great square church, but above the town and looking across it towards the sea, there are villas (let to English people in the winter, to Italians in the summer) half buried in flowers, where one can let the world go by very happily in the golden light of an Italian sun.

Frances and her husband had got possession of one of these villas for a month or two, and when they were tired of loitering about the garden, they would saunter up that sunny road towards the hills, catching fresh peeps of beauty on the way, and almost forgetting that the February fogs and rains were still rioting at home, and people were shivering over fires and clothing themselves in sables. Here the air was delicious except at sundown or on a rare day of clouds, and the scent of violets was everywhere, for they grew in every nook and cranny of the walls.

"Laurence, you lazy boy, come out for a stroll with me," Mrs. Corbet said, laying a hand on her husband's shoulder, as he basked in the sun upon the terrace before the house, smoking a cigarette and looking out towards the sea.

"With all the pleasure in life, my queen."

"I don't like that name," said Frances, bending a little

to kiss him before he rose; "it sounds as if I were so domineering."

"And don't you domineer? Haven't I always to do what you tell me? And am I not always obedient?"

"I shouldn't care for you very much if you were!" Frances made answer with a nod and smile.

"Ah, you are still the Frank I know. Come along little girl, and tell me what you have been doing all the afternoon."

"I have been reading letters."

"Letters? None for me?"

"No, all for me this time. I have something to tell you, Laurence."

They had turned out of the gate and were walking along the scented sunny road; Frances carried a scarlet parasol, and she dropped it a little so that he should not see her face.

"Have you, dear? Anything important?"

"Rather. To begin with—Charlie and Milly have made it up with Lord and Lady Hernesdale."

"Oughtn't you to put it the other way round? I am sure Lady Hernesdale would do so."

"Well, I suppose the advances came from her. But don't you see what that means?"

"Means? It might mean many things. But I suppose—with Lady Hernesdale—hum! My dear Frank, be worthy of your name, and say at once that the lawsuit is over, and that the Flemings have won the day!"

"You knew it already!"

"Not a word of it, but you were trying to be diplomatic, which is not like you. Well, that's a good thing, anyway. What a rage Andrew will be in!"

"You are quite sure you don't mind, Laurence?"

"Mind? What have I to mind, my dearest? I should have been very sorry indeed to turn out the Flemings. In fact, if judgment had been given for us, I suppose we should

have had all the bother of having to arrange a deed of gift, and give it them back again."

He said it with a perfectly matter-of-fact air, and Frances raised the edge of her parasol to show that her face was bright.

"You see, my dear child, you hadn't a bit of a claim to the place," said Laurence practically. "If anybody had, it was myself, as I was a nearer relation than the Flemings; but I always begged my aunt to leave it to them. They were her own kinsfolk. They were poor. They were deserving—I always hoped to see Chloe queening it in the big drawing-room, and Milly cutting capers on the terrace. I suppose now that she is Lady Heron she does not cut capers any more!"

"Oh, Laurence, I am so glad that you are not fond of money!"

"I am very fond of what it can do for us sometimes! I don't think we should be here without it, Mrs. Corbet. But a love of money for its own sake is a form of insanity to which I don't think I am prone. Well, what more news?"

"Oh, nothing much. Lady Hernesdale came down to Milly as soon as ever the result was known, and made friends with her. And Lord Hernesdale simply worships the baby."

Laurence chuckled. "Fancy the stiff old Earl with a baby grandson. And I'll be bound that he is at Milly's feet."

"Yes, Mrs. Fleming says almost as much. And she tells me that Andrew pretended to be very unhappy and says he was induced to marry Chloe under false pretenses, but that he is really growing as fond of King's Leigh as Chloe, and that he will now have plenty of time to finish his book."

"I'm glad of that." Then, after a pause; "You've something else to tell me, have you not?"

"How dreadfully quick you are, Laurence! I never can keep anything from you."

"I see it in your face, if it does not come from your lips."



"I was lowering my parasol on your side, expressly that you should not see. But Laurence, this is something more serious—it is a letter from old Mr. Derrick."

"Ah!"

He knew by her tone that it was something that concerned the memory of her father; and he put his hand into her arm, so as to draw her a little closer to himself. They sat down on the low wall on one side of the road, and there in the sunshine Frances drew out a letter and handed it to her husband.

It set forth in Mr. Derrick's crabbed, formal way that subscriptions to the new chapel had come in so lavishly, that they were able to spend more money over its interior decoration than they had at first anticipated. And it was the desire of the congregation that something should be placed in their house of worship which should especially recall Silas Wedderburn to their minds, and that part of the money which had been collected as a gift to him should be used in that way. He wished to know whether Mrs. Corbet approved of this idea and he sent a design for an oak pulpit and reading-desk which it was proposed to place in the building. They were simple, but well designed, and the nature of the gift seemed appropriate, seeing that Mr. Wedderburn had been so well-known as a preacher in the town.

"Do you like it?" Laurence asked.

"I like their kindness," Frances said. "I can't help feeling as if my father would rather that his memory were not perpetuated in Rushton. He will live in the hearts of those that loved him—that is enough."

"Yes, but I think you must not refuse, dear. You would hurt Matthew Derrick—and we must not hurt him. If you have no other reason, accept his proposal. And I am not sure that you will not like it in the end. It will remind everyone of the best part of him, of the good that I am sure he tried during part of his life to practice, of the strength which came to him in the end."

"I will remember that," said Frances, and the tears were in her eyes, as she gazed out at the lustrous, violet-tinted sea.

They had not noticed that as they conversed, a black figure of somewhat austere aspect, was walking up the hill towards them at a slow but steady pace. They were made aware of it by the fact that when the lady in black had approached them, she made a resolute pause, and looked them straight in the face. And then they saw that it was Lavinia Wedderburn.

Frances drew back in positive affright and horror. "Laurence, let us go," she said hurriedly starting to her feet.

"I trust," said Miss Wedderburn sourly, "that you will be good enough to listen to me for a minute or two."

"Yes, listen to her, Frances," said her husband.

His quick eyes had grasped the fact that Miss Wedderburn was very thin and very shabby; she looked like a person who had reached the last limit of respectable poverty. Her beaded mantle was brown and half denuded of its beads; her boots were burst, her gloves in holes, her bonnet a mere wreck of crushed ribbons and flowers! Laurence was sorry for her. But Frances's eyes were dimmed with tears and she could not see the poverty that showed itself in every detail of her cousin's dress.

"I cannot listen to her," she declared, "she has done her best to ruin the lives of everyone she came across. Think of the way in which she behaved to you aunt, Laurence; and then to the Flemings, and last of all to my dear, dear father. She embittered his last days and she poisoned his life, in a way that I can never, never forget."

"Nevertheless, my darling," her husband whispered in her ear, "you must be just. She wants help; we cannot let your father's cousin starve."

"Oh, if she wants money, give it to her," said Frances, listlessly, and sitting down upon the low stone wall again, she hid her face in her hands. Laurence turned and looked the waiting woman full in the face.

"Mrs. Corbet will hear you," he said, "if you have anything to say; she will help you, if you require help, to the best of her ability; but you must remember that she does not desire your companionship, nor even—your acquaintance."

"I am sure I do not want to trouble her with either," said Miss Wedderburn, in a tone of perfect coldness. "I have something to say, however, and I shall be very glad to say it now. I heard that you were here, and I thought I would come on—"

"All the way from England?" said Mr. Corbet, in some surprise.

The woman hesitated a little, and a red flush rose in her thin cheeks.

"No," she said, "only from Monte Carlo."

Mr. Corbet nodded silently. Now he understood her plight.

"I heard yesterday of the judgment in the law-suit. It is given in favor of the Flemings, as I might have known that it would be. You will remember that under Miss Kettlewell's will I am entitled to an annuity. That will now being in force, I wish to claim my little income once again."

"You wish to take money," said Frances, suddenly raising her head, "from the people whom you tried with all your might and main to injure?"

"It is not their money," said Miss Wedderburn, "it is money that Miss Kettlewell left to me. I should like to transmit my address to them; that is all. Their lawyer can forward me the quarterly remittances."

"It would be better, I think," said Laurence, "if we were to pay you the annuity; it would come to the same thing in the end."

"Do you mean—pay it out of your own pocket?" asked the haggard woman in the road.

"Well—yes. Better than that you should ask the Flemings for it."

"But it is my right," said Miss Wedderburn. "I have always stood upon my rights. I have not asked people to give me anything. I will have the money that Miss Kettlewell left to me. But if you like to supplement it, I shall not object. I am growing old and weak; and I have had bad luck lately—"

"If I give you anything, I shall make it a condition that you leave off play," said Laurence.

"Who told you that I played?" she asked, looking defiantly in his face. "No one knows me at Monte Carlo—how can you tell?"

"I am sure of it. But if you do not, then you will not mind giving me the promise."

"I shall give no promise. The luck may change," said Miss Wedderburn, in an odd inward voice.

"I am afraid we can do nothing for you then."

"Then I will write myself to Mrs. Derrick, said Lavinia composedly. "Oh, you see I know the news—I know that she is married, and that Lady Heron has a baby, and all the rest of it. Who would have thought little Milly born to be a Countess by and by! I will write to them, and give them my address, and ask for the arrears. It is what I have a right to, and I always get my rights."

"Don't do that," said Frances, suddenly rising from her low seat. "We will make it up to you. Don't apply to Mrs. Derrick. We will pay you Miss Kettlewell's annuity—double."

Laurence half smiled. But he did not interfere.

For a moment, a bright light gleamed in Lavinia Wedderburn's eyes. Then it disappeared; she shook her head.

"I would rather have Miss Kettlewell's annuity," she answered. "But you are very kind. I will tell you where I am staying and you can write to me if you like. I will think over what you say."

She told them the name of her lodging in Monte Carlo, but she gave no definite answer about the annuity. Lau-

rence knew that she was hoping to get money from both sides.

"Well, I must go now," she said, "I want to get back to my hotel—I am going to stay the night. Good-bye, Frances."

She put out her hand, but Frances did not respond. Miss Wedderburn uttered a little laugh.

"You do look like Lady Emmeline's portrait still," she said. "I don't wonder at Miss Kettlewell's infatuation. I suppose you have not troubled to find out the reason for it."

"The reason?" said Laurence, eagerly.

"Yes, the reason. Why did you never ask my cousin the maiden name of his wife, and of his wife's mother. His wife's mother was Lady Emmeline Heron. That is the reason why Frances resembles her grandmother."

"Is this true?"

"Perfectly true. You can ascertain it for yourself any day. See, I have written out the names for you on this scrap of paper. Lady Emmeline made an unfortunate marriage, and had one daughter, who married worse and fell into great poverty. She came back to England, long after Lady Emmeline's death, and died rather suddenly at Sudbury. My cousin Silas married her daughter."

"This is curious indeed. It explains the likeness," said Laurence. And to himself he said also that it explained certain marked characteristics of his wife's, which in no way resembled those of the Wedderburns.

"And now," said Miss Wedderburn, in her coldest voice, "I have put it into your power to say that Frances is as well descended as the Flemings. She is a cousin of the Hernesdales."

She turned and went down the hill, in the shining sunshine. As she turned a corner, she stepped into the shadow which was gathering thickly on the lower levels of the hilla. The symbolism struck Frances as she stood with her husband in the light; and suddenly she thrust the papers that

she had been holding into Laurence's hand and ran down the hill.

"Cousin Lavinia," she said, "I can't let you go like this. Tell me before you say good-bye that you think of us kindly, and that you will let us help you if we can."

"I am very ready to be helped," said Miss Wedderburn, in her indifferent voice. "I am extremely poor." Frances pressed her purse into her cousin's hand—she knew that it was well filled.

"Thank you, my dear. You must excuse me if I call you 'my dear.' It is for the last time, perhaps. You know when all is said and done"—she turned away her face—"I loved your father, Frances."

And Frances kissed her before she went back to Laurence and the glimmering heights.

THE END.

















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